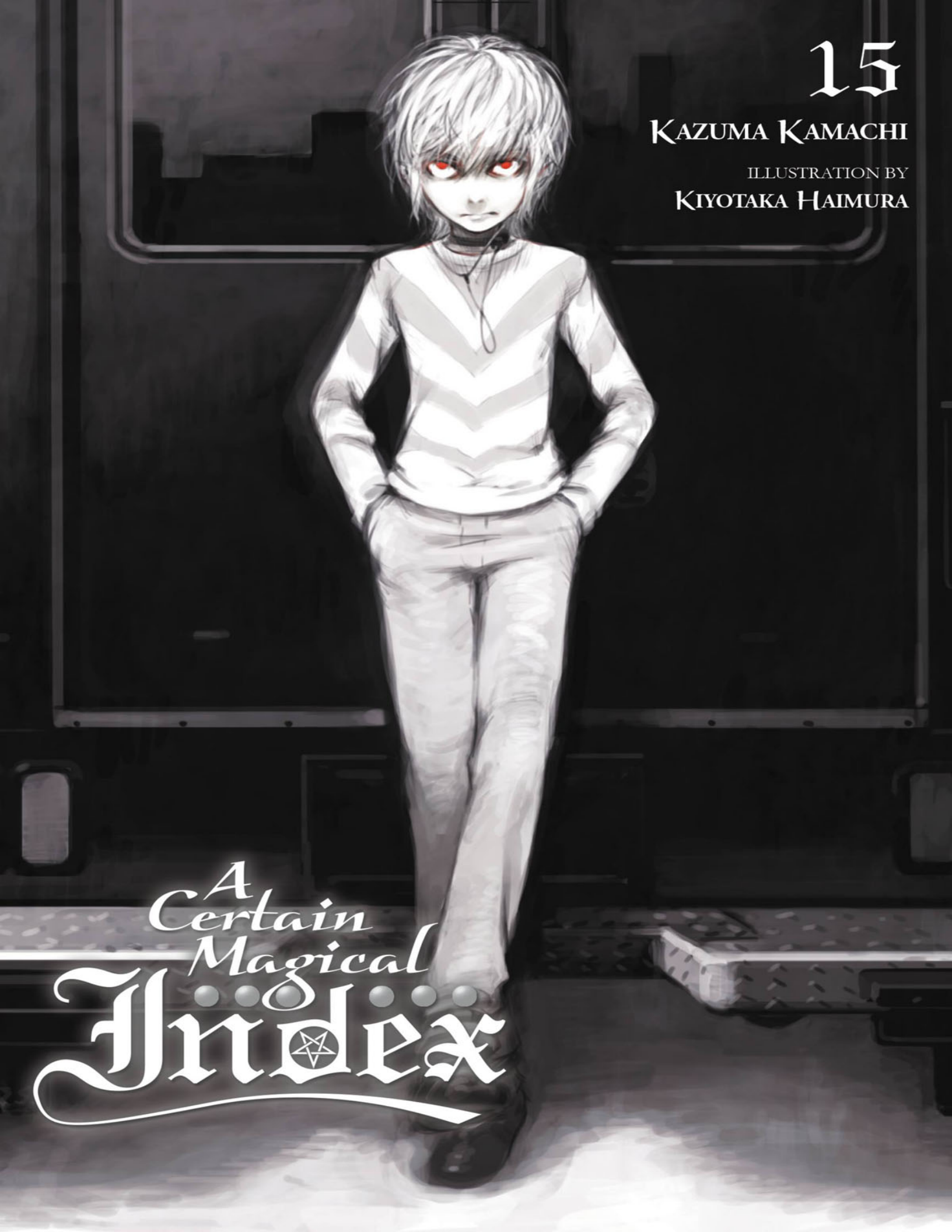
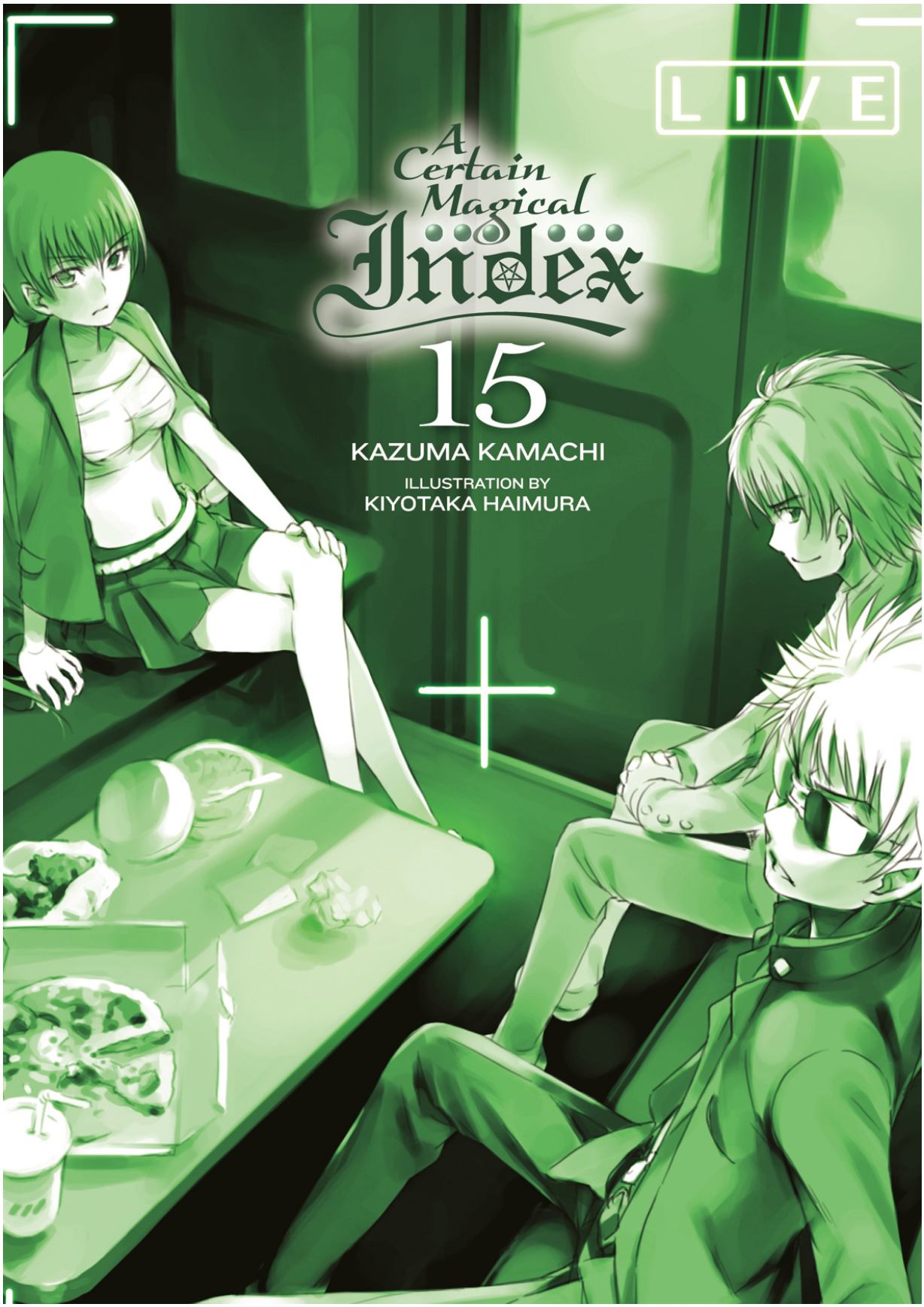

15
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A Certain Magical Index


LIVE
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KAZUMA KAMACHI
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KIYOTAKA HAIMURA



contents

PROLOGUE *THE FINEST LEAD BULLET FOR YOU, MY BELOVED* Management.

CHAPTER 1 *THE SIGNAL SHOT NOBODY HEARD* Compass.

CHAPTER 2 *THOSE GRADUALLY BEGINNING TO ACT* Altair_II.

CHAPTER 3 *IN A LAND WHERE ABILITIES ARE FORBIDDEN* Reformatory.

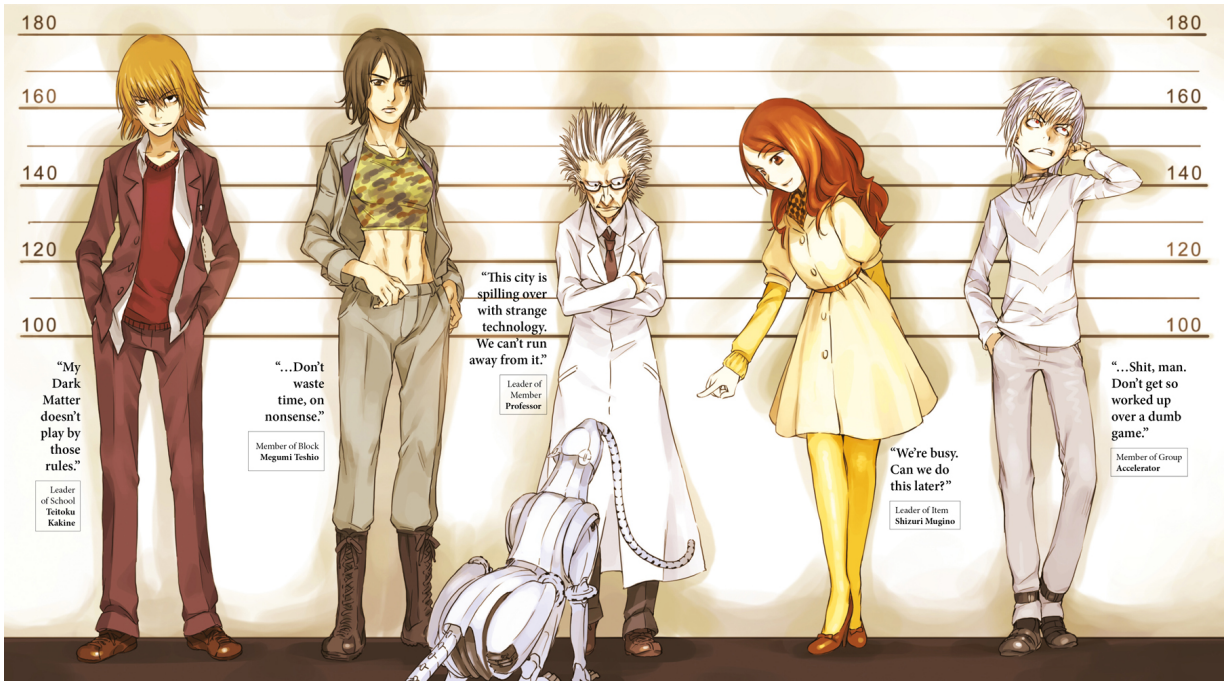
CHAPTER 4 *THE PAPER-THIN LINE BETWEEN SELF-LOATHING AND PRIDE* Enemy_Level5.

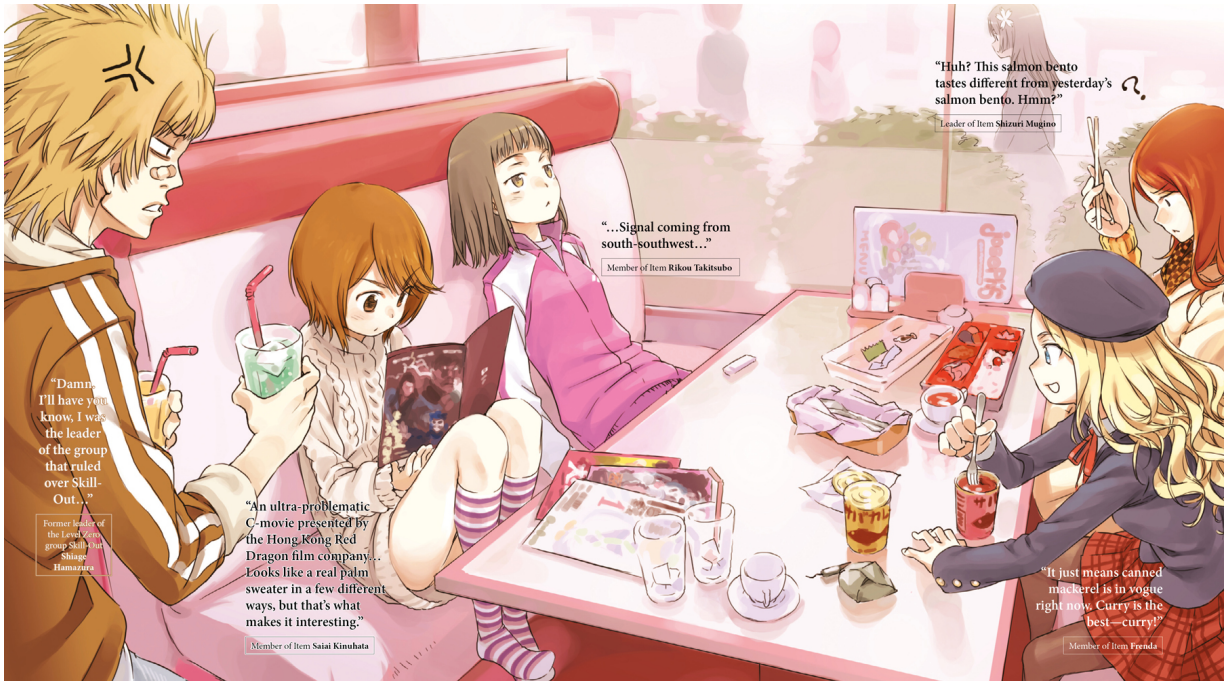
CHAPTER 5 *ONE TO OVERCOME THE STRONGEST BLACK WINGS* Dark_Matter.

EPILOGUE *TO THE SURVIVORS GO THE SPOILS* Nano_Size_Data.






180
160
140
120
100
"My Dark Matter doesn't play by those rules."
Leader of School Teitoku Kakine
"…Don't waste time, on nonsense."
Member of Block Megumi Teshio
"This city is spilling over with strange technology. We can't run away from it."
Leader of Member Professor
"We're busy. Can we do this later?"
Leader of Item Shizuri Mugino
"…Shit, man. Don't get so worked up over a dumb game."
Member of Group Accelerator


"Damn— I'll have you know, I was the leader of the group that ruled over Skill-Out…"
Former leader of the Level 2 group Skill-Out **Shiage Hamazura**
"An ultra-problematic C-movie presented by the Hong Kong Red Dragon film company… Looks like a real palm sweater in a few different ways, but that's what makes it interesting."
Member of Item **Saiai Kinuhata**
"…Signal coming from south-southwest…"
Member of Item **Rikou Takitsubo**
"Huh? This salmon bento tastes different from yesterday's salmon bento. Hmm?"
Leader of Item **Shizuri Mugino**
"It just means canned mackerel is in vogue right now. Curry is the best—curry!"
Member of Item **Frenda**

A Certain Magical Index

VOLUME 15

KAZUMA KAMACHI
ILLUSTRATION BY: KIYOTAKA HAIMURA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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A CERTAIN MAGICAL INDEX, Volume 15
KAZUMA KAMACHI

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue: The Finest Lead Bullet for You, My Beloved

Chapter 1: The Signal Shot Nobody Heard

Chapter 2: Those Gradually Beginning to Act

Chapter 3: In a Land Where Abilities Are Forbidden

Chapter 4: The Paper-Thin Line Between Self-Loathing and Pride Enemy

Chapter 5: One to Overcome the Strongest Black Wings

Epilogue: To the Survivors Go the Spoils

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

PROLOGUE

The Finest Lead Bullet for You, My Beloved Management.

There are things we call blind spots.

The cleaning room of this major department store, for instance.

The store's employees thought a contract crew used the room, while the contractors believed the employees utilized it. Visitors to the store wouldn't enter a place like that, so there weren't any surveillance cameras inside. Nobody paid any attention to it. As a result, you were left with a room everyone knew about but nobody had ever entered, let alone known where to find its key.

Normally, its iron door was kept locked at all times.

Except for at this moment.

Using a key he'd received in advance, Motoharu Tsuchimikado opened the door in the back of the store. The room was stylishly decorated, resembling a bar: Before him was a sofa large enough to seat at least ten people, with an incongruously small table beside it. At the back of the room, there was a counter. This was clearly a different world than the one outside the door.

A man noticed Tsuchimikado enter and cheerfully said, "Come on in."

This college-aged guy, who was shorter than Tsuchimikado, stood behind the bar. He appeared

somewhat comical, wearing a brand-name suit but no necktie, and he had a few shirt buttons undone to show off his chest.

The man, with four or five cell phones hanging from his neck, had a nickname: Management.

As he put an elbow on the counter, he said, “Ah, my bad. I do things casually because this is the service industry. Makes it easier for people to talk to me, y’know? I can stop if you like.”

“No, you’re fine,” said Tsuchimikado, causing the man to grin.

Tsuchimikado threw his key to Management, and he caught it with one hand. Despite what he’d said, once this job was over, the man would take all the furniture and move somewhere else.

“Now then, what might you be after today? I’ve got a great deal on lock pickers, ‘sensor breakers’—cream of the crop, I might add. If you’re here for something a little more risqué, I have a few money launderers. We’re running low, though, after the new regulations from that 09/30 incident. Other than that, it’s what you’d expect.”

Some robberies and larcenies took more than one person. When they did, they’d assign roles such as driver, lock picker, burglar, and money launderer, but some ran into a problem where they didn’t have enough people. Management would supply the people and profit off the finder’s fee.

“I have to say,” remarked the man, “I mostly get emails and texts these days. Don’t have many coming here personally like you.”

“Should I not have come?”

“Oh, no, you’re fine. It’s not much risk. Oh, right—do you want something to drink?”

Tsuchimikado glanced at the shelves behind the counter, saw the thick cans lined up on them, and frowned slightly. “Not a fan of drinking paint thinner.”

“You misunderstand. Those are cleaners for getting rid of oil-based ink. Gotta have ’em in a business like this. The alcohol’s over there, in the fridge. Some good stuff in there, have to say.”

“Either way, I’ll pass.”

Despite the refusal, Management’s face remained mostly the same. “Too tense to get drunk? Suppose that’s how it is before a job. Let’s get down to business, then. What are you looking for?”

“Sorry, that actually isn’t why I’m here.”

“Hmm?”

Management looked at him dubiously. Without skipping a beat, Tsuchimikado said:

“I’m not a customer. I’m the guy who’s bringing you in.”

For just a moment, Management gave him a blank stare.

But when he saw Tsuchimikado pull a handgun from his belt, he quickly dove behind the counter.

Tsuchimikado pulled the trigger anyway.

Bang, boom, bam!! A series of gunshots followed. A hole appeared in one of the cans of thinner, immediately filling Management’s nose with a terrible stench.

Bastard…! The man, still hidden, reached for a bulletproof jacket and a submachine gun underneath the counter.

He popped a magazine into the gun, then cocked it to load the first bullet, when suddenly the enemy gunshots stopped. Management slowly looked around the edge of the counter to check.

Out of ammo? he thought, now covered in thinner—but a moment later, he got a different answer.

The scrape of an oil lighter.

“?!” Management’s throat dried up.

Before he could say anything, Tsuchimikado threw the lit lighter behind the counter.

He had no time to think. Management flung the jacket and gun aside, then jumped out from behind the counter to get away from the chemicals.

The lighter dropped into the puddle of paint thinner, and with a *boom*, hurled up explosive flames.

Management had barely escaped its range, but now, unarmed, he noticed the gun pointed at him.

He raised his hands and cried, “Wait, wait, wait! Okay, okay, I won’t resist—”

Tsuchimikado pulled the trigger anyway.

Bang!! After he heard the sound of the gun discharging, Management looked at his side in surprise to find a dark--red hole.

“Wh-why, you…I said I wouldn’t…”

Before he could finish whatever he was saying, he collapsed to the floor.

Tsuchimikado, expression mostly unchanged, made sure Management was at least breathing, then took out his cell phone.

He dialed a number in his contacts, and when someone picked up, he said simply, “*Collection*.”

The voice on the other end of the phone said something.

Tsuchimikado continued, “Look for where this guy lives. We’ve got a lot to investigate. Notify our ancillary. Actually, wait. We don’t need an ambulance, just a patrol wagon. I’ll snoop around using his registered address, but I want Accelerator to— He’s not around?”

He clicked his tongue in frustration. “Right. He’s over there at the moment. No choice, then. Unabara, you go out. Have Musujime switch to backup. Call you later.”

He hung up.

Motoharu Tsuchimikado, Accelerator, Mitsuki Unabara, and Awaki Musujime.

The four together were simply called Group.

A small team, working in society’s shadows to protect its light.

CHAPTER 1

The Signal Shot Nobody Heard

Compass.

1

October 9.

Today was the anniversary of Academy City's independence, and a holiday within its walls.

The hospital in District 7 was no exception. Since morning, its air had felt relaxed. A frog-faced doctor left through the front entrance and felt the soft morning sunlight on his skin.

Beside him stood a small girl of about ten.

She was called Last Order.

On September 30, the Hound Dogs, led by Amata Kihara, had kidnapped her and used a device called Testament to input specific data into her brain. The hospital had been working to remove that data, but the job was now done and she was being discharged.

"Finally leaving the hospital and nobody's here to greet you," said the doctor, sighing.

Last Order didn't seem too worried. "'Misaka can ride the taxi by herself,' says Misaka says Misaka, sticking out her chest."

"Well, we've eliminated the virus in your brain, so I suppose there's no more cause for worry. I'll put the taxi fare on Ms. Yomikawa's tab, so go straight to her apartment, all right?"

Just then, a taxi arrived at the roundabout in front of the

hospital. The frog-faced doctor waved it down, then put Last Order, who was holding her belongings, into the back seat.

As he watched, the driver asked, “Where to today, miss?”

“‘The amusement park in District 6!’ says Misaka says-Mis—”

“To the Family Side II apartment in District 7. Don’t forget, all right?”

The frog-faced doctor had stopped the nonsense about to come out of Last Order’s mouth—in the end, he was the one looking after her.

The driver gave a pained grin. “I understand.”

“Do you need me to give you directions?”

“No, there aren’t many apartments in this city—it’s all student dorms. And I can just put it in the car’s navigation system.”

When the frog-faced doctor pulled his head out of the car, the back door closed automatically. With Last Order on board, her hands on the window and her eyes staring outside, the taxi began to gently roll away from the hospital.

After it vanished from sight, the doctor went back to his hospital. He walked through an uncluttered hallway and into a space for conversation with only a simple sofa and table, then went to the vending machine along the wall and bought a coffee.

This vending machine was the kind that used paper cups. There was no liquid coffee inside the rectangular metal box; instead, it made it automatically, starting with grinding-pre-roasted beans. It took a bit longer this way, but it tasted good, and was a nice way for him to switch gears.

The doctor exhaled. *Next I’ve got to finish the Sisters’ adjustments and release them from here as soon as—*

Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted.

Ker-click.

Someone had pressed a gun to his back.

The doctor froze.

He listened to the shallow breathing directly behind him, thought for a moment, then spoke.

“Already back from Avignon, are we?”

“Shit. Where the hell did you get that information?”

The voice was familiar—Accelerator.

In his right hand, he held a walking cane designed with a modern aesthetic, but since they were in a hospital, it didn’t make him stand out very much. And he’d used his body to hide the gun in his left hand from others.

The doctor didn’t bother to put his hands up. Instead of acting conspicuously, he spoke quietly, all for the sake of the patient behind him. “…You always have quite the greeting prepared, don’t you?”

“I want info. The blueprints for this electrode.”

Accelerator was talking about the choker on his neck. It looked like an accessory, but it actually had an electrode fitted in the back that converted his brainwaves into other electric signals. Those signals gave him restricted access to a special electronic communication network called the Misaka network.

The doctor was the very man who’d made the electrode. He kept his face steady and replied, “Why do you need them? If your choker is on the fritz, I can fix it for you.”

“Just give me the blueprints.”

“Last Order wanted to see you. If only you’d gotten here a little bit earlier…”

“Can it. That has nothing to do with you.”

“That isn’t true. She was my patient, and she wanted to see you. It’s my job to make it work out.”

Accelerator quietly cursed. “…I know that. That’s why I waited until now, dumbass,” he spat, sounding truly bitter.

The frog-faced doctor reached into his white coat pocket and took out what looked like a mechanical pencil’s central casing. It was, in fact, a USB drive. He moved his hand behind him.

“You were prepared.”

“As I said, it’s my job to prepare whatever my patients need,” said the doctor, looking at the vending machine, which was still churning. “But it’ll be hard to put what’s in there to use. I make everything I need myself, you know? If you wanted a second electrode, you’d have to start by manufacturing the machine tools.”

“…”

Accelerator took it, then quietly stepped away from the doctor’s back.

The doctor turned around.

There was no one there; not even a trace. He’d probably used his vector-changing ability to jump into the nearby stairwell.

“…”

The doctor stared silently at the empty space.

An electronic beep went off at his side. The doctor removed his coffee from the vending machine and took a sip of the bitter liquid.

2

Mitsuki Unabara was in a room inside a certain District 7 building.

It was the second of a multi-dwelling apartment complex called Family Side.

The room was designed for a family to use; it was fairly spacious 4DLK, meaning four bedrooms and an open area that served as a living room, dining room, and kitchen. Judging by the furniture, though, only one person probably lived here. All it took was a quick look around the other empty rooms to figure that much out. Maybe it was the same for the rest of the apartments.

He poked around as he talked with Tsuchimikado over his cell. “…Anyway, I’ve arrived at Management’s apartment. I’ll start searching now. As for things that he

could have stored information in…There's a computer, an HD recorder, and a few game consoles that probably have storage media in them."

"If there's even the slightest possibility, grab it. We could potentially find bits of information stored inside rice cookers or washing machines if we took them apart to get their AI configuration memory cards out."

"It sounds like this will be a pain," muttered Unabara. "I do still wonder what sort of jobs Management was helping with."

"*I'm looking into that now*," answered Tsuchimikado wearily. *"A new criminal organization just formed a day or two ago, thanks to him. He filled their gaps, provided the personnel they needed. And they paid good money for fighting strength to use right away. They're sure to pull something very soon. It's our job to figure out what—and to stop it before it happens."*

"Will it be bad enough that Group needs to make an official outing?"

"Look, just get to work. I want to complain about all this just as much as you, but these are the only jobs Group ever gets: piles of shit and nothing else."

"All right," answered Unabara.

He walked through the big apartment, sticking little tags on the computer, the HD recorder, and the rest. He didn't plan on dragging everything, refrigerator and washing machine included, out by himself. For now, he was marking them so that their ancillary organization could carry them out later.

Well, that about does it. Just as Unabara had finished his run-through, he noticed something odd:

Bills.

"…" There were several paper bills on a waist-high shelf.

Nothing about that was unnatural, but they felt strangely isolated from any wallets. Unabara prodded about the room, finding a credit card and a passbook.

The placement of objects in a room said a lot about a person's daily routine. But by Unabara's analysis, the way these bills were sitting on this shelf seemed abnormal. Putting them this far away from a wallet made it seem like the resident was making sure they wouldn't get mixed up with any others.

He looked at them again, then flipped them over and started speaking into the phone. "Tsuchimikado, do we have any equipment that can read IC chip information?"

"What?"

"I found five paper bills here. If I remember correctly, Japanese yen minted and circulated in Academy City come with microchips in them. We should probably investigate these as well."

"Right. I'll get something ready…I didn't find any notable info here. I'm gonna give up on the department store's cleaning room and head over your wa—"

Unabara didn't get to hear Tsuchimikado's voice until the end.

Boom!!

A rocket suddenly broke through the window, flew inside, and exploded right in the middle of the room.

A clamoring of heavy footfalls rushed the front door.

Men dressed in gray armor moved into the room swiftly yet cautiously. There were five, all with full face masks and identical equipment. Not a single one stood out from the rest.

Without a word, one of the men signaled with a finger to check the charred apartment—the formerly five-room one, given that, as they stepped over an air conditioner that had fallen to the floor, one of its thin interior walls had collapsed.

Not only did no automatic fire-extinguishing system turn on, the regular fire alarms weren't even working. They'd

disabled security ahead of time.

They didn't exchange words among themselves, and so the soft clacking of metal stood out—they had their firearms, which were hitting against their hard armor, ready and loaded.

Seriously…Mitsuki Unabara sighed as he watched. He was spying on them from a small gap in a door that had been knocked diagonal by the explosive impact, his back against the wall of the kitchen space. He'd jumped into the room the moment the rocket had crashed through the window.

Now he produced an obsidian knife from an interior pocket. *They tried to destroy the information by blowing up the entire room. Must be people who'd be in trouble if we got our hands on Management's info.*

This was the third floor.

Moving slowly so he wouldn't make any noise, he went up to the smashed window. From this view alone he spotted about fifteen more men, all dressed in black. There were probably a lot more waiting out of sight. He was completely surrounded.

"…"

Unabara's dismantling sorcery, the Spear of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, was incredibly powerful, able to completely disintegrate objects by concentrating and reflecting the light from Venus onto them.

But on the other hand, he needed to designate his targets one at a time. In exchange for the ability to one-hit kill even the strongest enemies, he could only go one by one for even the weakest.

They're using mainly 9mm submachine guns, plus military handguns of the same caliber. If they started firing in this cramped space, skill wouldn't make a bit of-difference—I'd be full of holes in no time.

And furthermore…this is bad. A lot of grunts showing up at a time like this is really bad.

Even if the enemy went all out and had everyone charge inside at once, it would be pointless, since the apartment had limited space, thanks to the doors and hallways. They'd end up packing inside and getting into a jam.

Instead, by keeping their invading team as small as they could and having most of their men surround the apartment complex, they eliminated the possibility that their target could escape. Even if he did wipe out their smaller team, they would either send in a new one or decide that if a rocket launcher couldn't take the enemy out, they'd simply have to blow up the entire building.

…They're experienced. Even if I slip out, I might not be able to get through their encirclement. I'm stuck here…

He adjusted his grip on the obsidian knife.

Sweat had broken out on his palms without him realizing it.

Now, what to do?

3

"Fires in District 7. Five instances confirmed. Relevant buildings' security systems, including automatic fire extinguishers, are inactive. Begin firefighting at once."

In an emergency correspondence center for connecting civilian reports to groups such as Anti-Skill and Judgment, a female operator continued to convey the information coming up on her monitor to the appropriate authorities.

"Requesting criminal identifier dispatch from Anti-Skill to be a witness to the fire brigade's inspections. In addition—"

The operator took up a fire manual, which was propped up against the wall of her communication booth, thus taking her eyes off the monitor for just a few seconds.

During that time, a rep from the team waiting on-site for specific instructions said "*Understood*," and the call abruptly ended.

"…What?" wondered the female operator.

On her monitor, it said she'd already given them everything they needed.

4

It was fifteen minutes after the rocket had fired into the complex.

Motoharu Tsuchimikado and Awaki Musujime were in one of the apartments of Family Side's second building.

There were no fire brigade or Anti-Skill officers. They spotted a few curious onlookers near the building, but nobody came inside; there had been an explosion, after all. They wouldn't do that, considering the danger of being caught in a fire or building collapse.

The apartments had been built for families, but most of its residents apparently lived alone. Plus, far more teachers and faculty used apartments than students. After Academy City had sent out Anti-Skill to prepare for "war," the strain of making papers and other teaching materials had fallen to the rest of the faculty, so even on a holiday like this they'd be out at work.

"This the place?"

It probably used to be a high-class apartment with four bedrooms plus an open area serving as a kitchen, living room, and dining room, but it was like an explosion had gone off right in the middle of it. Furniture and wallboard had come apart and was scattered everywhere, reducing the unit to only a couple of rooms. They could see the bathroom right after stepping through the front door.

"They cleaned up all the evidence. Even a mind-reading esper might not be able to get anything out of this," muttered Musujime as she gazed at the charred floor.

Accelerator arrived a moment later on his cane. "Damn. Thought you called me for something important. Just some fun little leftovers again?"

"Did you *finish your errand*?" Tsuchimikado asked

without looking at him.

“Shut up,” said Accelerator flatly, looking around. “This it? The place where that moron Unabara vanished?”

“Yeah,” said Tsuchimikado. “For now, we’ve captured Management, and we got the guys from our ancillary transporting him in an escort car. But whatever info comes from his mouth won’t be trustworthy. And if he starts going on about all the information being stored up in his head, we won’t get anywhere with him. We wanted hard data to back up what he’s saying, which is why I sent Unabara here.”

His tone grew weary. “While he was here, he came under attack by a third party. We don’t know whether they were after Unabara in particular or just anyone who wanted information on Management, but it’s looking like the latter. From his initial report, we knew there was a computer, an HD recorder, and a few other things, but they’re all totally gone. Any appliances with AI in them are gone, too—the whole lot of ’em.”

“It does seem like there are a few appliances left, though…,” said Musujime, using her foot to point at a scorched microwave oven. “They’re probably all products without onboard AI. They left behind the stuff you can’t put info into.”

After more searching, they found a few other things, like a TV with a broken screen and an iron. However, everything important indeed seemed to have been stolen.

Accelerator took a seat on a bed with cotton sticking out and sighed in annoyance. “Damn it, what a pain. Don’t know anything about that shithead Management. Don’t know what happened to Unabara. Seriously, can’t you people do your jobs?” He jabbed his foot at the broken microwave on the floor.

Just then, its plastic door opened up and something came out.

“…Eh?”

Paper bills.

About five, marked with soot, had been in the microwave for some reason.

“Unabara reported these—he was interested in them.” With a thin smile, Musujime crouched and picked them up. “There should be microchips in these bills to prevent counterfeiting. Maybe something’s written on them. Putting them in the microwave would shut out electromagnetic waves and stuff. This might have been enough to fool the attackers even if they had a way to detect the chips.”

“…So our shithead was the one who hid them here?” asked Accelerator.

Then Tsuchimikado, a short distance away, announced, “Hmm?”

They looked over to see that he’d opened a closet, and inside it was a man’s corpse. A closer inspection revealed that all the skin around his right calf had been torn off.

Tsuchimikado said, “This is Unabara’s doing.”

“What’s with the foot? Hobby of his?” replied Musujime, put off. Her foot had once been injured in an accident during class. The trauma from the incident hadn’t completely left her. It was so bad she had to use a low-frequency oscillation treatment instrument to alleviate the stress whenever she used her ability.

Tsuchimikado shook his head. “He uses human skin to make a certain kind of tag. I’ll cut out the explanation, since you two don’t know anything about sorcery, but…Basically, *he’s got a skill where he can switch places with someone*,” he said, looking at the scar on the corpse’s foot. “He probably looks just like this guy at the moment. I bet he’s waiting among the people who attacked this place, biding his time.

“In other words,” he said, pausing, “that chameleon is still alive and smiling. Don’t know where, though.”

5

What is she doing? wondered Kazari Uiharu, cocking her head to the side.

She saw a girl of about ten, who was inside a stopped taxi —presumably at a light—arguing with the driver…Well, actually, it looked like the girl was one-sidedly biting his head off.

Uiharu didn't have to get any closer to hear their loud voices.

"'I keep saying let me off, let me off, so why won't you let Misaka go?!' argues Misaka argues Misaka, putting her hands on her hips and puffing out her cheek!!"

"Look, miss, I've been paid to drive you to your destination, so I can't let you—"

"'While he's making excuses, Misaka will look for an escape!!' says Misaka says Misaka, quickly getting out of the car and running into a back alley!!"

After shouting that, the little girl disappeared into an alley so narrow you probably couldn't even fit a bicycle through.

The driver scratched his head, at a loss. Uiharu walked up to him.

"Hmm? Oh, are you with Judgment?" asked the driver, looking at Uiharu's armband.

Judgment was a student organization created to help keep the peace in Academy City. Their jurisdiction was mainly limited to school, but apparently, most people weren't aware of the difference.

Uiharu gave him a blank look. "Um, was there some kind of trouble, sir? Did that girl leave without paying?"

"No, just the opposite," said the driver, at his wit's end. "Her, er, *guardian* gave me the money beforehand, and I was supposed to take her to an apartment complex. But now she's left, and I haven't given her back the money."

"Oh. Well, that's up to the passenger, sir. Couldn't you just accept it as a tip?"

"The taxi fare was twelve hundred yen. I got five

thousand to begin with. I'd feel bad if I treated it as a tip."

What a nice person, she thought.

The driver glanced at the alley, which he clearly couldn't bring his car into. "…Still, I can't get out of the car and chase her."

"Should I look for her?"

"Yes…yes, if you could, I would greatly appreciate it. Hold on one moment."

The driver had a machine in the car print out a receipt, then handed it, along with the change on top, to Uiharu. Since she was wearing the Judgment armband, he didn't seem particularly cautious when it came to handing the money over to her. "Please, give this back to her."

"I will, sir." Uiharu put them in her skirt pocket. After exchanging contact information with the driver just in case, she set off into the narrow alleyway.

In that dark space where the sun's light couldn't enter, she called out, "Um, what was her name? Hmm…Miss Odd Haaair?!"

"'Hey! Misaka's identifier is Last Order!!' says Misaka says Misa…huh?!"

For the time being, she'd gotten an answer, so Uiharu walked that way in search of the girl.

6

Black smoke billowed.

A boxy escort car had stopped on the road, apparently after crashing into a guardrail. Only the front half, though —something had torn apart the car's frame, and its back half was in the middle of the road.

The car was the same model Anti-Skill used, but it wasn't one of theirs. Instead, Group's ancillary was using it. At Tsuchimikado's command, it was secretly transporting an important witness.

"Ow, damn it…"

A college-aged man came out from the part that was cut away—Management. Handcuffed, he stepped down onto the asphalt, then looked at his side and scowled. The gunshot wound had reopened, and fresh red liquid was starting to spread out on top of the dark-red stain that had already dried.

Nevertheless, after spotting a boy nearby, he gave him a mild smile. “Sorry. I flubbed the job.”

“Don’t be.”

The boy was wearing a pair of metal goggles on his head. No, not goggles—his eyes weren’t covered. It was a ring, wrapped around his head like Jupiter. Countless cables plugged into it from all directions, and they connected to a device at his waist.

Management offered his hands to the strangely dressed boy. “Sorry, but could you cut these, too? I can’t do first aid like this, but it’ll be a pain to find the key, too. I’m pretty sure it would be best to leave here immediately.”

“All right,” the boy said, moving his fingers as though swiping a card.

A moment later, Management’s wrists were shattered.

“Ah, *aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh*?!”

Management writhed in agony, eyes filled with pain and surprise as he looked up at the boy. The boy, taking aim once again—this time at his vitals—spoke simply, without much change in his voice.

“That’s too bad.”

7

Group was a cruel organization.

The remaining three members took a wait-and-see stance with Unabara, whose whereabouts were still

completely unknown. However, they still might not have gone to help him even if they had a hint about his location. Their fundamental policy was that if any of them mismanaged something, they had to fix it themselves.

Therefore:

"Got a call from our ancillary. The escort car with Management on board has been attacked."

"Everyone dead?" Accelerator asked.

"No. They were nice and left everyone but Management unconscious. Either way, there goes our option of getting the man himself to talk."

"Do you think they left a clue as to who did it?" Musujime added.

"Again, it's probably in these bills."

For now, they had the five paper bills.

After leaving the Family Side II apartment complex, Group had decided to return to their hideout and investigate the electronic information contained on the bills' IC chips.

"Man, didn't think our secret hideout would be some empty store in an underground mall. What if some hopeful corporate dropout wanders in for a peek?"

"Then we'll leave," said Tsuchimikado distractedly. "There's hideouts all over the place, and this one was meant for them originally anyway." He put a device for reading the bills on the floor. It was connected to a laptop via cables.

"…What is that?" asked Musujime, surprised.

Tsuchimikado gave a small smile. It was a cell phone wallet sensor, the kind next to cash registers in convenience stores. "Ugh…It was gonna be a pain in the ass, so I asked someone in the industry and just brought the whole reader here."

"Doesn't matter what we use," said Accelerator, sitting in a pipe chair and cleaning off his handgun. "Just get started already."

"Right," answered Tsuchimikado simply, picking one bill

from the stack of five and holding it up to the device.

No discernible language came up on the display. Only a jumble of numbers. Tsuchimikado fiddled with the screen, eventually starting to change them into sentences that made sense.

“That didn’t take long. We got a hit.” He followed the lines of characters on the screen with his eyes. “…It looks like Management’s product listing. There was a deal on a professional sniper. He was handling the sniper’s weapons, too, apparently.”

He ran the second bill over the sensor.

“The sniper’s name is Chimitsu Sunazara…though we can’t confirm its validity. It has his history and abilities here, too, but we can’t trust that, either. But the introduction fee was seven hundred thousand yen, which makes him one of the best ‘products’ on Management’s lineup.”

He ran a third bill over the sensor.

“This one has his weapons on it. He’s got…an MSR-001, a magnetic sniper rifle,” he finished with a foreboding hum.

“Magnetic?” repeated Musujime.

“Just what it sounds like. It uses an electromagnet to launch a steel bullet. Made by Academy City, of course. It’s simpler than a railgun on the inside. The bullet’s initial speed is two hundred ninety meters per second—not quite supersonic.”

“…Does that mean something?” she asked. “It sounds to me like a normal sniper rifle would be better.”

But Tsuchimikado grinned and said, “In terms of pure force, sure. But this one doesn’t use gunpowder, so it has no recoil. It doesn’t have the ‘sway’ sniper rifles tend to have, so you can attach a delicate, super-precise sighting device to it—if you used gunpowder, you’d need the whole thing to be sturdy enough to handle the recoil from firing. And…”

“And what?”

“If it doesn’t use gunpowder, it doesn’t make noise. Perfect for doing things in secret.”

Tsuchimikado continued, holding a fourth bill up to the sensor.

But this one only put up an error on the screen.

They couldn't read the all-important data.

"Damn. The chip must have gotten hit by the heat or the impact…Just based on the fragments of the header, this one has concrete details on the other end of the deal, the guys who employed him."

Tsuchimikado passed it over the sensor a few more times, but he never got the data inside to show up. He gave up on that one for the time being and held the fifth and final bill to the sensor.

A rough map of somewhere came up on the screen.

It was a simplified map that cut out everything except what was important. A red dot was displayed in the center, with numbers written next to the buildings nearby. But as to what story, or how many meters in length—all of that was unreadable from a top-down map.

Tsuchimikado laughed. "It's a sniper plan. Management was even dealing in these things?"

"Hah," snorted Accelerator. "What, did he run a general store or something?"

"It's showing the plaza in front of District 7's concert hall…," said Musujime, looking up at the ceiling. "Right above us."

"The plaza's been rented out by someone on the General Board for a speech. They must be after the VIP. Name is Monaka Oyafune. Don't know why they're trying to put a hole in her head, but they must have a grand plan in mind if they're trying to assassinate Oyafune. If we stop him, our job's done…As for Unabara, well, you know. He got the lowest score on this job, so we'll rescue him and make him play a penalty game."

"Hah! We going to run over and play tag with a sniper now?" grumbled Accelerator in annoyance. "Sounds like a pain. I'm sure the speech will be boring anyway— Can't we

just stop the event?”

Tsuchimikado shook his head. “Probably not.”

“Why?”

“Simple—the speech has already started.”

8

Accelerator and Motoharu Tsuchimikado had left the underground mall and neared the plaza in front of the concert hall, which was directly below them.

They hadn’t taken a sane means of travel, like the stairs or elevator; instead, they’d used Musujime’s ability, Move Point. The ability was certainly convenient, but it had a flaw: It was hard for her to warp herself. So she’d remained at the hideout alone, continuing their microchip analysis.

Many students were in the plaza, probably because it was a holiday. They wouldn’t have thought an outdoor speech would be interesting, but just at a glance, there were two or three hundred people there.

Around a hundred meters separated Accelerator and the VIP, Monaka Oyafune.

A simple stage was set up in the middle of the plaza, the kind that might be used for a cultural festival, and a middle-aged woman was standing on it. Four escorts dressed in black were waiting around her, but…

“No motivation,” said Accelerator, cutting it down to two words. “It’s like they’re screaming for someone to come put a bullet through whatever organ of hers they want. It’s completely obvious that VIP bigshot isn’t wearing anything bulletproof when you look at how thin her clothes are, either.”

“Stop it. That’s why we’re doing this.”

“That Shiokishi guy is on the General Board, too, and he wears a powered suit around the clock. Apparently, he’s not scared of being attacked—it just makes him feel uncomfortable when he’s not in it.”

“He’s an extreme case,” muttered Tsuchimikado, standing next to him.

Accelerator glared at him. He jabbed his chin at Monaka Oyafune onstage. “You seriously wanna protect that woman?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I don’t. The General Board is a bunch of shitheads. You think they deserve us risking our lives to protect them?”

Accelerator was referring to a man named Thomas Platinaburg. Like Oyafune, he was one of the General Board members. He’d never even talked to him before, but just looking at his furniture had told him right away that the man naturally looked down on everyone else and didn’t think anything of it.

“There are two kinds of people at the top of Academy City,” said Tsuchimikado quietly, slipping into the crowd in the plaza. “The assholes who deserve to die this instant, and the good people seen as assholes—the diligent ones. In most cases, those types don’t fit into the world well and always draw the short stick.”

Accelerator stared at Tsuchimikado and let out a quiet hum. Applause and cheering filled the area.

“I hear Monaka Oyafune is trying to give the children in Academy City the right to vote. Most of the city’s residents are minors who don’t have that. They can’t complain about policies adults decide for them. She says she wants to give them that right.” He laughed, his tone light. “If she’s not a thorn in their side, I don’t know what is. If the kids got voting rights, they could even stop this war.”

“Are you dumb? There’s no way it’ll be that easy. It’s a peaceful idea, but not a practical one. It’s like they don’t understand the meaning of the word *violence*.”

“The divides between races and the sexes were the same, too, at first. Special influential people weren’t the only ones fixing everything. Sure, they had a lot to do with it, since

they were leading the masses. But the big reason was the people who had been thinking they were powerless—they changed their minds. Then they all got together, and history changed."

Accelerator looked back at the plaza—the one with so many students in it, even though it was a holiday.

Tsuchimikado chuckled and said, "I don't know how you feel about it, but I think Monaka Oyafune is at least worth protecting. I would risk my life for her. I won't tell you to do the same, but don't think you can stop me."

Accelerator clicked his tongue in frustration, then used his cane to take a step forward.

"What a pain in the ass. Let's just crush that dumbass sniper already."

9

Accelerator and Tsuchimikado were standing about a hundred meters from the stage Monaka Oyafune was on. They should have been closer—it certainly wasn't what you'd call a good plan—but considering the crowd, this was what they had at the moment: checking the location with their cell phone GPS maps.

"Looks like there's about thirty-two possible sniping positions," said Tsuchimikado. "But with the stainless-steel board behind the stage, any point one hundred and eighty degrees behind it is actually a dead angle. Which means…"

"…It's one of the fifteen spots one hundred and eighty degrees in front. We could probably get the sniper if we went to every single spot…"

"…But there's nothing saying Chimitsu Sunazara is gonna wait around for us once he's in firing position," said Tsuchimikado, surveying the area.

He wasn't looking at Oyafune, as she smiled softly on stage, or the youth, listening to her and applauding. He saw a vehicle—a specially permitted commercial one—parked a

short distance from the plaza. Its body resembled a crane truck, but a giant fan-like machine was attached to the top.

"Looks like they do have a Wind Defense set up against sniping, at least."

"Eh?"

"You know how much the wind affects sniping," explained Tsuchimikado. "That machine purposely creates blasts of wind around a VIP to throw off their aim. They're probably using four of them, making a whirlwind all around the plaza. They're third generation, so they should be using a random number generator to make the air currents more chaotic."

But something else seemed to have caught Accelerator's eye, because, as he peered through the edge of the throng, he suddenly darted into the crowd to hide.

Tsuchimikado looked that way and saw, a few meters away, a middle school girl with a lot of flowers decorating her hair holding hands and walking with a girl who seemed around ten or so.

"'I told you, Misaka is looking for a lost child,' says Misaka says Misaka, announcing her intentions."

"Yes, well, um, a lost child?"

"'I don't really know, but I think he's somewhere around here,' says Misaka says Misaka, offering a prediction. 'My head feels like it's getting nervous about something,' says Misaka says Misaka, adding extra sense-based information."

"Right…I knew that silly piece of hair was incredible!"

"It's not silly!!" came the shout, and Accelerator's hand went to his forehead.





“…Why would that brat show up here?! Is God fucking around with me or what?!” he hissed.

“…Ha-ha. That’s just how life is,” muttered Tsuchimikado offhandedly, but after noticing a girl in maid clothes in the crowd, he buried his own face in his hands.

For once, their opinions matched—they had to ensure no “stray bullets” flew in their direction.

“Anyway, things get complicated with the Wind Defense throwing off the hitman’s aim…”

“That truck. Says on the side it’s an air-cleaning truck.”

“Well, it’s not *wrong*. It uses the same principle as the air purifiers that smokers use in schools’ faculty rooms. Just on a totally different scale,” said Tsuchimikado with pride.

Accelerator’s eyes were cold, though. “That’s great and all, but it’s not on.”

“What?!”

Tsuchimikado, startled, checked it himself. Accelerator was right—the giant fan on the big cart truck wasn’t doing anything.

“I swear it was just on…” It was protecting a VIP. Could it have possibly had a malfunction?

Then Tsuchimikado heard an odd *bkk* sound ringing through the noisy crowd around him.

It sounded like a metal pot crumpling.

“…”

Accelerator and Tsuchimikado looked in the direction of the ringing at the same time.

There was another Wind Defense–equipped special vehicle parked elsewhere. Its giant fan wasn’t on, either. And there was a thumb-sized hole in the cylindrical outer wall around the fan.

“It was him—Chimitsu Sunazara.”

“Bastard…,” hissed Accelerator. “He’s trying to take out the Wind Defenses to give himself a clear shot at Oyafune!!”

“Shit!!” cursed Tsuchimikado, trying to plunge into the crowd to get closer to Oyafune. But there were too many

people, and he couldn’t get as far as he wanted. Meanwhile, two more metal-pounding *bkk* sounds repeated in succession. Accelerator couldn’t see them from where he was, but the sniper was probably taking out the other Wind Defense machines, too, one at a time.

Damn it, thought Accelerator. *Magnetic sniper rifles don’t use gunpowder, so nobody would even notice if their equipment was getting shot at!*

The man-made gale barrier was gone now.

Tsuchimikado seemed to be trying to warn Monaka Oyafune of the danger, but it didn’t look like he’d make it.

“Great.”

Monaka Oyafune’s speech from atop the platform continued. The bodyguards in the vicinity were standing still, unaware of the threat.

If this went on much longer, it would be checkmate.

“What a goddamn pain!!”

10

The sniper, Chimitsu Sunazara, brought his magnetic sniper rifle up.

He was in a hotel room. He’d gone up to it without checking in, got its electronic lock open, and went inside. As for the window, in addition to disabling the security, he’d cut a square piece of it away to create a hole, out of which his rifle barrel extended.

A magnetic sniper rifle—although its form differed greatly from other existing guns, it was a metal cylinder as thick as an ankle with a steel box stuck onto it, almost haphazardly. Propped up on a tripod, the barrel was a strong solenoid coil.

A pair of suitcases sat next to him. One was for storing the magnetic sniper rifle after disassembling, while the other was for the rifle’s giant battery.

“…”

The range was about seven hundred meters.

He'd destroyed all the Wind Defense machines that were blocking him.

Monaka Oyafune, on the distant stage, seemed close enough to hug through the scope.

He would hit.

He thought so naturally, then relaxed and pulled the trigger.

That's when it happened.

Ga-bam!!

All of a sudden, part of the plaza in front of the concert hall exploded, flinging flames and black smoke into the air.

His target, exposed to the blast, flinched, crouching down. Because she had moved, Sunazara's bullet missed her.

"What was that…?"

Sunazara frowned. The timing was too good. Meanwhile, the big men stationed as guards around Oyafune came down to the platform to surround her.

He had a job to do.

He pulled the trigger again, but the steel bullet struck one of the bodyguards pressed against Oyafune. It flung his body down in spectacular fashion, but there was no blood, so he was probably wearing a bulletproof vest as a shield.

The guards changed positions. Oyafune ended up completely hidden behind the stocky men.

"Looks like that's it for now."

Long-range sniping was delicate. Even if you used a bullet that traveled at the speed of sound, sniping a target from seven hundred meters away would mean the bullet had to travel for almost two seconds before hitting the target. It was one thing if the person was standing still, unguarded, but with her running away—present tense—-with multiple bodyguards, it would be very difficult to shoot

her in a vital spot.

After thinking for a moment, Chimitsu Sunazara decided not to be stubborn and to withdraw.

“Still, what exploded?”

He looked through his scope, then saw the black smoke rising from one of the special Wind Defense vehicles. He’d shot them in order to stop them, but he was sure he hadn’t hit anywhere that would have made them explode.

“…”

A moment later, Sunazara’s breath caught in his throat.

Right next to the special vehicle in flames. A person with white hair, at the scene and yet blending in casually with the background, was looking straight at him—with a cane in one hand and flames and smoke at his back.

“I see.”

Sunazara looked away from the scope and immediately began taking apart the magnetic sniper rifle. As he put each part into the suitcase, he said to himself:

“I’ll remember that face.”

11

When Motoharu Tsuchimikado set foot in the hotel room, it had already been vacated.

But there was a square section of glass unnaturally missing from the window.

“Shit.” Tsuchimikado took out his cell phone and called Accelerator. “Retrieval is a failure. But if Sunazara fled, he probably won’t be doing any more sniping today. Get Oyafune to stop her speech for now, get security to regroup, and get them out of there.”

“*I’ve got a message from Musujime*,” said Accelerator on the other end. *“She managed to read the chip on the fourth bill we couldn’t get anything from. Like we thought, it’s got the name of the guys who hired Chimitsu Sunazara on it.”*

“Who was it?” asked Tsuchimikado.

Accelerator answered with an annoyed voice. *“…School.”*

“What?”

“Same as our ‘Group’…An organization hiding in the shadows of Academy City.”

INTERLUDE ONE

A man was standing around in an open-air café at lunchtime.

Tables crammed with customers were covered with all sorts of food, but his table alone stood empty. Only a big hodgepodge of printer paper was stacked there, not a single coffee mug in sight.

The man was staring at the papers spread out on the table, his hands stuck in the pockets of his white coat. Printed on the dozens of sheets in this bundle was-involuntary-diffusion field data on espers from the data banks.

A girl in a red sailor-style school uniform, sitting across from the man's seat, looked at him dubiously. "What do you think you're going to find by looking at them?"

"All sorts of things," he answered without looking up. "You may not know this, given that *you're a sorcerer*, but this has all kinds of information in it. It's not just a weak power that vents from espers—it's them unconsciously interfering with reality…By examining the infinite variety of types and strengths of powers, one can explore the minds of espers, too."

"Unconscious interference…?" repeated the girl, not understanding.

"If we advance our understanding of involuntary diffusion fields, or IDFs, we can highlight the outline of espers' personal realities and use them for data by

investigating their personalities and behavioral patterns. Though, I think the resulting parameters would be much more utilitarian and easy to understand than psychological profiles."

A silvery beast was next to the chair the man sat in.

It was a quadrupedal animal made of titanium alloy and synthetic resin. It had the basic form of a carnivore in the Felidae family, but its nose was unnaturally long, like an elephant's. The metallic creature had a seeing-eye dog walking program installed, so it blended into human society with a surprising litheness.

The beast opened its mouth. *"Professor."* The voice didn't sound synthesized—it was the voice of a young man with rich enunciation. *"It appears there has been activity within Group and School."*

The man called Professor looked over at the mechanical creature. Its speech functions weren't produced with a robotic AI; someone in another place was simply speaking through it via a wireless network. One could think of it as a slightly more complicated telephone.

"Did they make contact?"

"No. Group appears to have failed to capture. In this situation, they may not be able to catch School's tail."

"Hmm." The professor sighed just once. "Either way, *the others* will probably act, too."

They were on a team directly under the jurisdiction of Aleister, the Academy City General Board chairperson.

They acted as "that person's" limbs, uncaring of good and evil. That was all that was expected from the small outfit.

"From the outset, *groups like ours* have complicated reasons for acting, but various powers higher up the chain have pressured us and controlled us," the professor said, his tone relaxed. "But after the violence that occurred during the 09/30 incident, most of the powered suits have been sent out to clean up in Avignon. That force makes for

effective hands for the man on the telephone. They can't use the suits freely now, which gives us a huge opportunity."

"Then perhaps the time is ripe."

Suddenly, a voice appeared from directly behind the girl in the red uniform.

Nobody had been there a moment ago, but now someone was there. It was a boy covered in a big, baggy down jacket.

It was like he'd appeared out of thin air.

"Yes," the professor said languidly, placing a hand on his nearby creature's head and stroking it lightly. He didn't seem surprised at the boy's appearance. The girl sitting across from him watched their exchange with a lack of interest.

Her expression suspicious, she asked, "How do we know exactly how *they're* moving? The intel from higher up could be wrong."

"They have tech that makes it possible to know with accuracy."

The professor's hand stopped petting the synthetic animal.

He was staring at the sidewalk across the street from the café. A girl, in what might colloquially be called maid clothing, was passing by. But the professor wasn't looking at her. That girl was sitting atop an oil drum–shaped cleaning robot. He watched its very smooth procession down the sidewalk.

He nodded to himself.

He was honestly impressed.

"I never thought of an idea like that."

"Professor, please keep your mind off strange ideas."


Group
MOTOHARU TSUCHIMIKADO
MITSUKI UNABARA
AWAKI MUSUJIME
ACCELERATOR
School
UNKNOWN
UNKNOWN
CHIMITSU SUNAZARA
UNKNOWN

CHAPTER 2

Those Gradually Beginning to Act
Altair_II.

1

Inside an RV that one of their drivers had brought around for them sat Accelerator, Motoharu Tsuchimikado, and Awaki Musujime.

It was noon.

Fast-food meals lined a small table bolted to the floor.

Each was eating the food they'd bought—Accelerator his spicy fried chicken and Tsuchimikado his giant hamburger. They weren't kindred spirits even in what they ate for lunch.

Meanwhile, Awaki Musujime, eating a fancy salad from a direct-delivery brand in the Mediterranean, watched them. "…That stuff will shave years off your life."

"Eating meowthing but green and yellow veggies seems too healthy to meow. You need both meat and vegetables to maintain a healthy body, y'know. You've gotta have a balance."

"Hah. Wouldn't you be happier eating meat and dying? You'd be able to die after doing what you wanted to do until the end," said Accelerator to Musujime, licking grease off his thumb. "Anyway, find out anything about those School guys?"

"I accessed the data banks, but aside from the name, no. It looks like they're as secret as we are. It just says Group and School in there.

“But,” she added with a pause, “When I looked around, I found a few more organization names like that.”

“There weren’t only two?” Tsuchimikado bit into his hamburger and hastily tried to keep the meat from coming out the other side.

“Group, School, Item, Member, Block…,” she answered, counting on her fingers. “Five, just from what I can tell. Details are unknown, but they’re probably like us—-*unofficial teams made up of a small number of people*. School were the ones plotting to snipe Monaka Oyafune. Would that make them the ones who blew up Management’s mansion and attacked his escort car? Maybe Mitsuki Unabara infiltrated them, too.”

“Who knows? But if he’s doing spy work in School, I wish he’d at least give us a sign. We might think he’s a baddie and accidentally kill him,” said Tsuchimikado, listening to Musujime as Accelerator put a coffee can to his lips.

…But why would School be trying to assassinate Monaka Oyafune?

2

They’re doing whatever they want, thought Shiage Hamazura.

Right now, he was in a family restaurant in School District 7. But the woman named Shizuri Mugino, who had installed herself at one of their table’s seats, was blatantly eating a convenience store meal she’d bought elsewhere. *That poor, poor little waitress waiting at the edge of the table…*

“Huh? This salmon bento tastes different from yesterday’s salmon bento. Hmm?”

The woman, by the window and wearing a short-sleeved coat in bright fall colors even though she was inside, re-crossed her stocking-covered legs and tilted her head in confusion as she mumbled.

It's the same as always, thought Hamazura.

Weirdos, every single person at the table.

"It just means canned mackerel is in vogue right now. Curry is the best—curry!" said a blond, green-eyed high school girl named Frenda sitting beside Mugino as she wrestled with the can. Maybe she was bad at using can openers, because she wrapped some kind of plastic tape around it, then attached a fuse to the tape and blew the thing open. Hamazura was pretty sure you were supposed to use that for breaking open doors.

Meanwhile, sitting across from Frenda was a mature--looking girl of about twelve named Saiai Kinuhata, who wore a fluffy knit dress. She wasn't paying the least bit of attention to what the weirdos were doing (not that she had common sense or tolerance but because she was *that* kind of weirdo). Instead, she was browsing through a movie pamphlet. "An ultra-problematic C-movie presented by the Hong Kong Red Dragon film company…Looks like a real palm sweater in a few different ways, but that's what makes it interesting. Yes, worth a check. Takitsubo, what do you think?"

She was asking an all-around lethargic girl named Rikou Takitsubo, sitting next to her. She hadn't touched her food; she was just sprawled out on the booth seat, eyes wandering here and there, never focusing. "…Signal coming from south-southwest…," she muttered.

…These girls were a team called Item.

They were an unofficial Academy City organization whose main business was to hold the city's upper echelons, including the General Board, in check. This small group of four had real influence in this city, and by extension, the science faction as a whole. They were treated with the same level of secrecy as Group and School.

Shiage Hamazura wasn't an official member of Item. He belonged to their ancillary organization, doing odd jobs and being their driver.

Before, he'd been the temporary leader of Skill-Out, an armed organization comprising back-alley Level Zeroes. But after their plans fell through and they sustained catastrophic damage, his life of standing above others had come to an end. Now he was doing grunt work in Academy City's underworld.

…Still, though, thought Hamazura. Ever since they'd assigned him here, something had been constantly worrying him.

Being the only man in a group of women is really uncomfortable.

This booth seated six, and Hamazura was closest to the aisle. They'd assigned him the job of refilling their drinks.

"So!" said Shizuri Mugino after finishing most of her salmon bento. "About that incident where one of the General Board members, Monaka Oyafune, was almost killed this morning. With that, I think we should start moving, too."

"Actually, I never got any information about that," said Frenda simply.

Mugino paused with a grunt. Then the short-sleeved--coat-wearing woman glanced at Hamazura. "Hamazura, would you forward this incident's details to everyone's phones?"

"Yeah, yeah," answered Hamazura. He wouldn't complain when they gave him orders. This was his job now. He took out his own cell phone, then sent them the saved data.

"Hmm…"

Everyone looked at the information on their phones.

And what came up was an adult video downloaded from the Internet.

A moment later, all four members of Item slapped their cell phones closed. With stares of contempt, they shut the

doors to their minds, then barred those mental doors shut, then took their mental underground elevators down to evacuate to their mental nuclear shelters.

“I, wait!! Do-over! There must be some mistake!!”

The delinquent leader who once led over one hundred people in Skill-Out bellowed a plea.

As for the four members of Item…

“Hamazura…”

“Man, you really are a creep.”

“Bunny girls are a big hit for you, Hamazura?”

“It’s okay, Hamazura. I still support you even though you’re like that.”

Hamazura, trembling at the warm words, this time sent the correct information about the attempted sniping of Monaka Oyafune.





Kinuhata sighed. “Right, the one School totally planned. I thought we’d, like, totally dealt with their assassin sniper three days ago.”

“They must’ve hired a new one,” said Hamazura. “It just means they ignored our warning.”

“Man, didn’t we argue about why they were after Monaka Oyafune then, too?” said Frenda, stabbing the contents of her can of mackerel with a fork. “Oyafune is on the General Board, but man, she’s useless. She has almost no influence. She’s not even worth killing. But they still wanted her…”

“School still hired a new sniper after the one they lost, then still tried to assassinate Oyafune even despite our warning,” said Takitsubo lazily, continuing for Frenda.

Mugino nodded shortly. “There is no value in killing Monaka Oyafune. Despite the risk of getting found out, they decided to force their plans and shoot her. Why is that? … Hamazura!”

Hamazura’s shoulders jerked in surprise. *What?! Why does it seem like she’s trying to get me to say something funny now?! D-don’t look at me at times like this!!*

“U-um, well!! Wait a sec, it’s coming up my throat now, I’ll know in a moment!!”

In the end, he had enthusiasm, but couldn’t actually say anything.

“Uhh, Hamazura…”

“Man, the way you get flustered is creepy.”

“There’s totally different kinds of creepy, but Hamazura is the worst kind.”

“It’s okay, Hamazura. I still support you even though everyone keeps calling you creepy.”

The girls gave disappointed sighs. The Level-Zero Hamazura hunkered down on the floor and stopped moving.

Mugino ignored him. “Well, like I said, there’s no value in assassinating Monaka Oyafune. She’s too straightforward.

But School still chose her for their target. So, like, maybe they chose her *because she doesn't have any value*."

"Because she doesn't? I totally don't get it."

"I mean, like, maybe School just needed *someone*. They only wanted to cause a big fuss, so they chose a VIP whose death wouldn't affect much…In other words, they went after the VIP with the least security." Mugino sounded amused. "As for other VIPs…Well, even in just the General Board, nobody else would have been giving a speech outdoors in the past couple days. That Shiokishi guy wears his powered suit around the clock, right? There's no way they can snipe someone like that, so I think they chose whoever would be easiest. And honestly, Monaka Oyafune didn't have much in the way of protection."

"…Man, poor Oyafune."

"Assuming that's correct, what was School after? I propose this: a system of guaranteed VIP security." Mugino stuck out her chest proudly—a chest visible even outside her short-sleeved coat. "Academy City designates several people and organizations as VIPs, starting with the twelve General Board members. Their protection comes from a different security group. If anyone ends up in a life--threatening situation, they'd call in people from all over. They'd do things like close off roads for ambulances to pass through and get all the biggest names in medicine to do surgery.

"What I'm saying is this," concluded Mugino after a pause. "What do you think would happen if a VIP was almost assassinated?"

"They'd call in other people to defend the medical facility, then get all those special scientists and machines and stuff together," replied Kinuhata. "Heh, you're saying School would use the chaos to do something else? How boring."

It would certainly create an opening, but the method wasn't very decisive. It wouldn't affect District 23's strict security or the Windowless Building much at all. At most, it

would raise the possibility of attacks on facilities that were already targets to begin with.

“It could be insurance,” said Mugino. “If School got serious, they could break into most facilities by force. However,” she added, “they were so intent on obtaining insurance that they hastily replaced the sniper we took care of and plotted to assassinate Monaka Oyafune. It seems like they’re pretty high-strung about it.”

“Man, that means Oyafune was just a means of insurance, and School plans on attacking somewhere or someone else now.”

“Yep,” said Mugino, nodding.

Hamazura broke in anxiously. “…Wait, doesn’t that mean they *wanted* to fail?”

“I don’t think it matters, really. Even if she did die, they’d devote a lot of people to her for heart and lung resuscitation and crime scene inspection and autopsy and stuff. She might not be all that, but she’s still one of only twelve members of the General Board—one of the highest VIPs in the city. They would mobilize all sorts of unknown technology for it.”

“Urk,” said Hamazura, scrunching up his face.

Mugino continued anyway, not so much as batting an eye. “I’ll check the facilities with less security because of the attempted assassination of Monaka Oyafune…Actually, maybe that’s not enough. I’ll check the points that would have changed if it had worked out, too. School must have controlled the situation so they could get to their goal whether or not their sniper succeeded. There must be a facility with less security that matches both conditions. That’s probably where School will show up next.”

Shizuri Mugino vigorously rose from her seat.

Without sparing a glance at Hamazura, she told him, “Hamazura, go look for a car, please. We’ll probably be leaving right away.”

Her snobbish tone pricked at Hamazura’s nerves, but he

couldn’t argue with her. He was just a grunt right now. “Damn. I’ll have you know, I’m the leader of over a hundred people in Skill-Out…,” he muttered anyway, despite himself.

“Yes, and?”

…Damn it, he cursed to himself before leaving the family restaurant ahead of them to find a car.

3

Mitsuki Unabara was in a mixed-residence building in School District 10.

The building was missing a lot of tenants, and now he found himself in another vacant apartment. The sole juvenile reformatory in Academy City being right out the window might have had something to do with it.

There were a dozen or so armed men in the small room—and about four people who clearly looked like bosses—all standing around. On a business desk left haphazardly in the room were the firearms and laptop they’d brought there, as well as a tossing of smaller tools for disguise and hand cream and such.

…My, my. This is a quandary.

Right now, he was not Mitsuki Unabara.

He’d taken out one of the attackers, and now he was “borrowing” the man’s face.

Who would have thought someone so weak was central to this organization…

His plan was to disguise himself as one of the grunts at random, wait for an opportunity to go out on an errand or something, sneak away from the group, and flee…But apparently, Unabara had taken out one of the group’s bosses.

It would be hard to sneak away from them like this. It wasn’t like they were watching his every action, but whenever he moved, the ring of people seemed to move with him and around him.

He lost his chance and ended up coming to District 10 from District 7…

“What is it, Yamate?”

Suddenly, a voice spoke to him from the side.

A tall woman was standing there. Though she was slender, her whole body was covered in hard muscle. She looked built—almost like a statue, actually. He could tell at a glance she did behind-the-scenes jobs, but according to what he heard, she was also an Anti-Skill officer on the surface and had infiltrated their headquarters.

As he thought about all that, he recalled what the muscular woman had said.

Yamate. That seemed to be his name.

“*It’s nothin’,*” he said.

“Keep it together. Your strength, is vital, to our plan’s success.”

She spoke politely, stating each word clearly. It sounded like she was being kind while also looking down on him.

“School’s started to move,” said a bearlike man. “We’re the ones who sent them Management’s information, but… Damn. If only they’d taken action a little later.”

“In the end, attacking the mansion and destroying the information was all pointless,” said the muscular woman standing next to Unabara. “Thanks to School’s actions, the security level, of the entire Academy City, should have gone up. I just hope, it doesn’t impact, what we need to do.”

“Looks like this won’t be easy. We can’t get out of Academy City now, either. Though, it’s not like we can stop now anyway.”

“…” As Unabara listened to the woman’s voice, he pieced together the information in his head.

…This organization was apparently called Block.

…Block was presumably afforded equal secrecy and authority as Group.

…Block seemed to be planning something, but because another organization called School took action on the same

day, they were apparently caught up in it.

…In order to correct that impact as much as possible, Block had set off an explosion to clean up after School's mess. That was why Unabara had gotten caught up in this, too.

…Block had apparently given up on doing anything about the negative effects from School's mess and decided to go through with their plans anyway.

School and Block. This is starting to get complicated…

Then the brawny woman spoke to the bearlike man. "What about *him*? Is he all right?"

"…Oh, our telephone man. No problem there. After all, the powered suits he uses to do his bidding are all occupied in the Avignon cleanup. There isn't much the telephone man can do now. He's got it rough, too, eh? Normally he just tosses down orders from above, but if we ever went out of-control—well, we're his responsibility, so he'd be executed for it, wouldn't he? And the Hound Dogs were all wiped out, including their leader, Amata Kihara, after the 09/30 incident. They won't get in the way, either."

It seems like the same person is giving this organization its orders as Group, thought Unabara. But was this "telephone man" the same person, or was there more than one? Was more than one person giving orders to one organization, or was there one per team? Maybe he pretended there were several, but he was using a voice changer. That was an unknown factor.

Well, whether it's one or a bunch, they're probably not a very big team. And despite their size, they seem strangely flexible.

The "telephone voice" could come later. Right now, Unabara focused on Block's conversation, converting his thoughts into those of their group's composition and such.

At the very least, it doesn't look like they're acting out the intent of some higher Academy City power. The powered suits aren't around right now, so what are they

trying to do?

Unabara glanced to the side. The men from Block's ancillary were there. They were clearly assisting in this rebellious act, but…

No, how many people realize that?

Even if someone in a position of power handed them a command, saying "*It's an emergency. Meet up at location A*," things like that were commonly lies in the underworld. Nobody took orders at face value with how convoluted everyone's ulterior motives always got. When push came to shove, at the very end, all anyone could do was base their actions on what they'd personally seen.

Their intel could be a lie. Block would immediately shoot him if he turned his back right now. If he was to believe one of them, it had to be the latter. That was how he would live through this.

That's divine punishment for you, I suppose. Every day they deceive those beneath them. Now their information is less trustworthy because of it.

"All right," said the big, bearlike man, appearing to have made up his mind. "No more delays. We're getting started, too. Who cares about Block? I don't plan on living my whole life under *their* thumb."

So he said, but he didn't move right away, instead looking around the room.

Unabara asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, just wanted to do the usual safety check before that."

The bearlike man clapped his large hands twice. At his signal, a gloomy-looking girl moved slowly in front of them.

"Tetsumou…We're borrowing your Skill, Polygraph. Make sure we don't have any traitors, just in case."

"All right. My only value is in reading people's minds, after all."

…?! Mitsuki Unabara almost thought the surprise would show on his face.

He glanced around the room, then pretended to casually take a bottle of hand cream from the business desk. The four members of Block (including him) and the dozen or so in the ancillary group—if he was found out here, he'd be in trouble.

"Oh, one more thing. Anyone who refuses being read will be labeled a traitor on the spot. I like transparency, after all."

After the big man finished talking, the girl he called Tetsumou shook hands with each of her associates in turn. Only a mechanical, inorganic voice came from her lips.

"Tatsuhiko Saku. Age twenty-eight, Block's leader. Main job is to monitor coordination with outside agencies cooperating with Academy City."

The brawny woman spoke after the big, bearlike man.

"Megumi Teshio. Age twenty-five. Official member of Block. Anti-Skill roles include— …?!"

Tetsumou's face twisted in surprise. For a moment, bloodlust filled the air, but Teshio spoke calmly. "…You don't need, to be so enthusiastic, to read me. The reason *she* has no parents, and the cause of her inability to speak, do not make her past, very fun to see."

Tetsumou shook her head lightly, then looked toward Unabara next.

That was when Unabara let the bottle of hand cream slip out of his hand. "…Oh, sorry."

The bottle rolled to one of the men in the ancillary. As he reached out for it, the young man came up and handed it to him.

"Thanks. After you," prompted Unabara. The young man had just stepped in front of Tetsumou, basically interrupting the order, so Tetsumou held out her hand to him instead. She seemed to want to get this check over with promptly.

They shook hands, and then it happened.

"……Gaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?!"

All of a sudden, a red flame erupted on the man's and

Tetsumou's hands. With an explosive *boom*, blood sprayed. Several fingers flew. Tetsumou held her right hand, but she couldn't endure the pain and blood loss. She fell to the floor and stopped moving.

The young man, in a haste, reached for a first-aid kit, but the bearlike man blocked him. "What did you just do?"

"I don't know. How should I know?!"

"I asked you what you did!!"

"I'm a victim here, too!!"

Saku said nothing more. He pulled his handgun from his holster, pressed the muzzle against the young man's forehead, and pulled the trigger.

"Wait, I didn't—?!"

The young man from their ancillary was arrested with surprise…but the gun discharged.

With a thunderous series of bangs, the man, now covered in blood, fell to the floor.

The bearlike Saku threw a glare down at the crimson corpse. "…Well, it's a good thing we found that before we started. Wonder what on earth he did."

"Now what? Do we continue?" asked Unabara.

Saku shook his head. Tetsumou was hurt, and it didn't look like she was getting back up. "No time to replace her. I'll get a new checker later."

Seemingly uninterested in Tetsumou, he instructed those in their ancillary group to dispose of the body.

"…" Unabara glanced at the young man unmoving on the floor.

Just before he'd shaken hands with Tetsumou, he'd handed the bottle of hand cream to Unabara. At the time, *there was cream from Unabara's palm stuck to his hand*. And mixed into that cream was a trace amount of liquid explosive.

Unabara continued to blend the hand cream in his palm. This time, he mixed in a chemical to remove the explosive. *They may be enemies, but…No, there's no time to think*

about it, he thought, without letting it show on his face.

Saku, collecting himself, said, “Now, then…Let’s get started for real this time.”

He sat down in front of a laptop.

4

Beep!! went the electronic warning in the RV.

The Group members had finished their lunches and had been discussing what to investigate next, but their conversation was immediately cut off.

The hurried voice of the driver, also their operator, came over the onboard speakers. *“E-emergency! I’ll send you the data now!!”*

Accelerator and the others looked toward the speakers. A screen was set upon the wall to separate the driver’s seat from the rear living space, and a map of Academy City came up on it.

“The Virus Storage Center in District 5?”

“They analyze Academy City–made computer viruses and develop anti-virus software there…Looks like they’re being hacked,” said Tsuchimikado, his eyes following the scrolling lines of characters.

Despite finding out about a crime, the thought of notifying Anti-Skill or asking them for help never crossed their minds. Group never got jobs normal people could do themselves. If normal people could solve everything, Group wouldn’t exist.

Accelerator, in an annoyed tone, said, “Do we really have to go out there? You said there’s a bunch of others like Group, right? Just leave it to them.”

“They probably have different jobs. We don’t have a guarantee they’ll do anything, and besides, it’s pretty likely one of them is betraying Academy City. We have to be the ones to go.”

Tsuchimikado continued, “About that Virus Storage

Center…Aside from unanalyzed viruses, they have a multitude of experimental ones they made for research agencies in the city. If they end up outside…well, we'd have a panic on our hands."

"How far 'outside' are we talking, here?" asked Musujime, a meaningful smile on her lips.

The scientific technology of inside and outside Academy City differed by two or three decades, and that went for the viruses as well. Even if a virus was an old version for city machines, it could be a completely unknown threat for outside machines. And if a brand-new type of virus that Academy City didn't even have a fix for were to leak outside…

"Let's see if I'm remembering this right. Academy City's security prefers guarding things going out over things coming in, right? There should be some place to do that."

"…The external connection terminals."

Academy City was cut off from the normal Internet—it had formed its own interior network. Every external line hooked up to the Internet had to go through one of the facilities called "external connection terminals" before connecting.

"There're four, right? One at each compass direction," said Musujime.

Then they heard static start to come over the in-vehicle speaker. The hard-pressed voice of their driver and operator came over it:

"Beginning emergency quarantine of the external connection terminals. District 3 northern terminal, quarantined. District 12 eastern terminal, quarantined. District 2, southern terminal, quarantined…?! No response from District 13, western terminal! Cannot confirm quarantine!!"

"Ha-ha!" burst out Accelerator at the report. "Predictable once again!!"

Tsuchimikado grinned tenaciously as well. "Odds are ten

to one they're luring us there. I don't know who they are, but they must really want us to turn 'em into scrap."

The RV started off toward the district in question, District 13.

Their driver's uneasy voice continued over the speaker. *"Wh-what shall we do about the attempted assassination of Monaka Oyafune?"*

"Put it on the back burner."

"Actually, School might be doing that, too," pointed out Musujime.

"Also…What about Mr. Unabara?"

"Never cared about that guy anyway."

5

In a back alley, Shiage Hamazura flinched away from the electronic beeping.

The source of the noise was the portable device in Shizuri Mugino's pocket.

"Hey, are we just ignoring that?"

"I'm telling you, it's fine. Someone else will deal with it, so we don't have to."

Nevertheless, the device continued beeping incessantly. Mugino shivered at its awful persistence, then finally snatched the thing and shouted into it.

"Quit your noise, you little shit!! Can't you tell I'm not gonna answer you?!"

"You little…! We're not calling you up because we wanted to!!"

She wasn't on speakerphone, but it was loud enough for it to ring clearly in the nearby Hamazura's ears. The voice belonged to a lady—the mystery woman always giving instructions to Item.

"There's an emergency at the Virus Storage Center in District 5. I want you all to move out and fix the problem!"

"Aw, why?"

“Don’t ‘Aw, why’ me, you little…! Seriously, those powered suits sure are busy cleaning up after Avignon and looking for some Terra of the Left guy’s corpse. You should be working, too!”

“We’re busy. Can we do this later?”

Mugino sounded incredibly fed up, but the person on the phone again cried out, “*You little…!*” Then, “*Just so you know, it’s Item’s* job *to get rid of troublemakers in Academy City. Do your damn jobs!*”

“You say that, but…”

“And you! You said you’d killed School’s official sniper already! You said they wouldn’t be sniping Monaka Oyafune! You little…! Then why the hell did things come to this?! I thought it was all over, so I reported that the danger had subsided…I’m the one seriously pissed off here, so shape up!!”

The voice sounded like someone telling off a waitress who got her order wrong.

“*You’ve sure done it now, damn it…,*” the voice continued. *“I’ll ask another post to deal with the Virus Storage Center. In the meantime, I want a report on the attempted sniping. Double time that, at least!”*

“Sorry. Can’t do that.”

“What the hell? What do you mean?!”

“Because we’re about to slaughter all the shitheads in School right now.”

The yapping female voice stopped abruptly for a moment. *“Um, could I put in a request? Could you put, like, ten bullets in at least one of them?”*

“…Um, on an unrelated note, this is when our supervisor —i.e., you—is supposed to be stopping us.”

“Don’t give me your sass, you peon. I’ve hated those School bastards for a long time. And anything that I have to worry about should just get wiped off the face of the planet!!”

With a giant, warlord-like *Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha*, the call

ended.

Mugino put her portable terminal back in her pocket and made a face that questioned whether someone like that was really the right person to lead an organization. She glanced around. “By the way, Hamazura, can we really get an assistant?”

“Everything just goes right through you…Anyway, I’ll manage on that end,” he replied. “More importantly…”

Hamazura walked up to a passenger car parked on the road. He attached a fiberscope device to his cell phone’s lower port, ran the light cable, more slender than a *soumen* noodle, into the keyhole, then began looking for where the pin was. Using the data about the keyhole’s interior that was coming up on his cell phone screen in conjunction with several wires, he unlocked the door easily.

After climbing into the driver’s seat, he studied the engine keyhole under the steering wheel.

“Huh. What a handy skill,” said Mugino with genuine admiration as she got into the passenger seat.

Kinuhata, Frenda, and Takitsubo piled themselves into the rear seat. The car was a family four-door, like most taxis, but with five people inside, it felt cramped.

“Where to?”

“Kirigaoka Girls’ Academy, in District 18. The Particle Physics Institute is nearby. It was the only place during the Oyafune commotion to be thrown into chaos, with the people there getting called up for emergency security and to transport equipment. Because of that, their guard is pretty much down. A perfectly simple criminal scheme.”

“Only that one place? Seems really easy.”

“Excuse me, I forgot to say. There was only one place beneficial to them out of several.”

“Ah,” replied Hamazura effortlessly. “The Particle Physics Institute? Even if that was School’s real target, what are they after?”

“Who knows? It would have to be something more

important than Monaka Oyafune's life, right? Anyway, time for our little whoop-ass tour."

"Right," mumbled Hamazura as he easily started the engine.

Takitsubo spoke up from the back seat. "Hamazura, I didn't know you had a license."

"The card isn't what you need. It's the skill," answered Hamazura casually, smoothly driving off in the automatic car.

6

The RV Accelerator and the others were riding in charged into District 7.

Attentive to the clock, Tsuchimikado said, "…About ten minutes until we get to District 13."

The deal was that they couldn't quarantine the western terminal, but if they went to the site and directly disconnected the large-capacity cable, they could prevent access for now. The important people, stubborn about their budgets, didn't like this kind of solution, but the situation called for drastic measures.

But then, yet another alarm beep rang.

Tsuchimikado responded harshly, "What now?!"

"Hacking confirmed in District 23 as well! The Aerospace Engineering Institute's satellite control center is under electronic attack!!"

"Satellite?" repeated Accelerator, frowning. The ones Academy City had launched were spy satellites pretending to be weather satellites. If you used them, you could have a complete view of all the city and its surrounding areas. "Hey, things are getting interesting after all. The one satellite, *Altair II*—that thing had a large-bore ground-attack laser on board, didn't it?"

"This is bad," said Musujime. "The Virus Storage Center is still being hacked, too, right?"

“The countermeasure team is probably running around like a chicken with its head cut off,” mused Tsuchimikado. “Means this is a decoy so they can’t bring their full force to bear, but that doesn’t mean we can leave the Virus Storage Center alone, either. Even if it is a decoy, it doesn’t change how much damage it could do.”

“Do you think this is School, too?”

“No idea. It could be different group.”

“Wh-what will we do? Which one should we head for?!”

“Ha-ha. That’s a stupid question,” grunted Accelerator, kicking the RV’s side door with the bottom of his foot. He had already turned on his electrode, and the bundle of force, its vector altered, sent the metal door flying and bouncing wildly off the road.

Tsuchimikado, in spite of himself, shouted, “Accelerator!!”

“Dealing with those shitheads’ decoy wouldn’t be my thing. I’m going to District 23. If I wreck the big ground antenna they use to communicate with the satellites, the hacking will stop, too. Meanwhile, you two can do the grunt work.”

After saying his piece, Accelerator jumped out of the RV without hesitation.

Flying in an unnatural trajectory, he passed over the median and came to a *thud* in the passenger seat of a convertible in the opposite lane. A normal person would have been crushed by the relative speed, but with all the vectors on his side, he had no problem.

In fact, the one who flinched was the convertible’s driver.

“Whoa, what?! Wh-what?”

“I’ll pay for gas and labor.”

He heard a small clicking sound.

The driver felt something press against his cheek, but he didn’t move his neck. However, in the rearview mirror, he saw the dark shine of what looked like a small gun.

“District 23. No detours.”

7

I'm bored, thought Shiage Hamazura idly in the driver's seat of the parked car he'd stolen.

They were near Kirigaoka Girls' Academy in School District 18. The squarish building of the Particle Physics Institute was about a hundred meters ahead, inside which two organizations would be in the midst of a fierce battle—-School, assaulting the institute, and Item, intercepting them.

As he gazed that way, Hamazura was muttering to himself. "Wow, crazy…They wrecked half the building. And was that a beam cannon I saw flying out? That was Shizuri Mugino, right? Full steam ahead as usual, that Level Five."

The reinforced concrete building was leaning over, sending columns of gray dust billowing out. Earthquake-like tremors reached all the way to Hamazura's stolen car.

A Level Five, eh…?

Had Ritoku Komaba, former leader of the armed Level Zero organization Skill-Out, really believed he could fight against *that* and win?

And did Skill-Out, now without that leader, still think they could fight?

"…Shit," cursed Hamazura, smacking the steering wheel in annoyance. Either way, now that he had fled Skill-Out and surrendered at the espers' gates, he didn't have the right to talk about it.

Frustrated, he opened the driver's side door and stepped out.

Considering how he had to prepare for Item so they could leave at any time, and how they'd started cracking down on no-parking zones, getting out of the car wasn't a very good plan. But Hamazura wanted a mood change at any cost.

Today was a holiday, so not many people were near

Kirigaoka Girls' Academy. And there were three sports cars parallel parked on the road.

Hamazura's eyes lit up. *Whoa?! They're '89 Boosters!! They call it the emperor of four-doors!! W-wait, trying to steal such a remarkable car would just add to the risks... Aw, screw it, we're going home in a Booster today!!*

Imagining the low exhaust of the famous car, one that would make a celebrity's spirit waver, with strangely excited breaths coming from his nose, Hamazura took out his lock-opening tool. The sports cars were that much better than the rest—mature, high-grade vehicles, and he was just going up to one when…

"Hamazura!!"

"Y-yes?!"

Suddenly, a woman's shout came from right behind him, prompting him to hastily pocket the tool and turn around.

It was a female teacher wearing a green tracksuit.

Hamazura could tell how pretty she was despite the tracksuit…Actually, she was so beautiful he wanted to shout, *Why a tracksuit, it makes no sense, let's have sex!* but that wasn't the important thing.

She was an Anti-Skill officer—a fated enemy of Skill-Out.

Her name was Aiho Yomikawa, he recalled.

"Huh? What's the matter? I heard you were in custody after the Dangai University database center incident. Wasn't you after all, hmm? Well, that's good."

She was speaking casually for some reason, but not because they were friends. Her kindness was one-sided—-besides, he'd never have a positive response for the woman who'd caught him fourteen times in the city at night and thrown him into a police cell.

"What the hell are you doing here, you stupid hag?"

"Well, can't you see by looking?" said Yomikawa, pointing with her thumb at the Particle Physics Institute in question.

Hamazura's hand went to his forehead. Item's ancillary organization was probably suppressing all sorts of things,

but even they couldn’t perfectly hide an institute currently-half-destroyed.

Yomikawa put her hands on her hips and smiled at him. “You know, all I ever want is for you to be rehabilitated.”

“What? What the hell are you talking ab—”

“Bent over, staring at a car’s keyhole—for what? I *know* you don’t want to make me put you in cuffs out here in the open.”

Hamazura’s shoulders jolted. He couldn’t afford to get locked up here, so he shook his head back and forth. “Y-you’ve got it all wrong! A baby!! They left a baby in the car!!”

“What?!” Yomikawa hurriedly approached, then stuck her hands to the car’s window and tried to look in.

The security system kicked in a moment later. The shrill wailing of the alarm flustered the woman. Meanwhile, Hamazura whistled, feigning ignorance, as a station wagon barreled toward him from the Particle Physics Institute that was about to be destroyed.

The station wagon passed by, and then Shizuri Mugino came running from the institute, this time in pursuit. In one hand, she had another Item member, the airhead Rikou Takitsubo, by the neck.

They dove into the original four-door’s rear seat, Mugino saying, “Hamazura!! You suck at hitting on women, so come on! Hurry and follow that station wagon!!”

“I wasn’t hitting on her, you little twerp!!” Hamazura shouted back, returning to the car. He wished he could have had the ’89 Booster, but he obviously couldn’t steal it right in front of Yomikawa.

After he got into the driver’s seat and the engine roared to life, Yomikawa finally shouted at him. “Hold on, Hamazura!! What’s with that car?!”

“Can’t you tell?! I got my license!!” he cried, the biggest lie of all, before flooring it so they could get away from the woman as quickly as possible. The engine and tires

squealed at the sudden departure, and the family car began to roar down the street, leaving the tracksuit-clad teacher in the dust.

After leaving, Hamazura noticed something. “H-hey, what happened to Kinuhata and Frenda?!”

“It’ll take more than that to kill them. That station wagon comes first!!” answered Mugino in irritation.

Hamazura saw through the rearview mirror that the hem of her short-sleeved coat was burned, and her cheek was swollen as though someone had punched her. He tried to imagine what had happened in the institute. “How’d that happen? Thought you were number four.”

“They had a Level Five, too. Teitoku Kakine, that-number-two pile of shit,” she answered, petulant. “But we had something to say about that. We took out one of School’s members. Didn’t look like he was very strong inside the building.”

As a war trophy, she shook a sturdy-looking mechanical piece of headgear at him. It went all around one’s head like the rings of Saturn, with what looked like lots of plugs. Cords hung from them, but they’d been severed like mowed grass. He didn’t know what the thing was used for, but he was horrifed at the blood stuck to it.

“Anyway, what are we chasing that station wagon for?”

“We’ve gotta crush the guy in it and grab their cargo.”

“Cargo?”

“The Tweezers. Super-precise granule-sized object interference absorption manipulators.”

“…You don’t even want to explain, do you?”

“Anyway, it’s what School was after!! You can chase that station wagon without knowing!! And can this car even catch up to it?!”

“It’s all right.” This wasn’t Hamazura, but Takitsubo. She was sprawled out lazily in the back seat. “My Ability Stalker will perfectly track any involuntary diffusion fields I record. I can always search and find them, even if they escape

outside the solar system."

"Exactly," muttered Hamazura. "They're not getting away as long as we have such a good navigation system. More importantly, what are we doing after we stop—"

He broke off. A huge truck had suddenly broken onto the road from the side.

"?!"

He didn't even have time to swing the wheel.

The gargantuan crane truck slammed headlong into the side of their four-door. The deafening *crash* rattled his brain. The sensors reacted, causing the steering wheel airbag to deploy, but given that it was a side impact, that didn't seem to matter.

Hamazura's car, which had been traveling straight, skidded to the side, pushed by the truck. It continued, breaking through the guardrail, running onto the sidewalk, and impacting the side of a building.

Caught between the yellow crane truck and the concrete wall, their car was completely unable to move.

They hadn't considered the show it would make or the collateral damage.

They wanted to kill them, plain and simple, no matter what it took.

"…Ow…"

"Damn…that was School!" snapped Mugino. "They must really want that station wagon to get away. They're stalling for time!!"

The crane truck backed up about ten meters. A girl who looked about fourteen was in the driver's seat behind the protective glass. Despite her petite, slender figure, she wore a short, open-backed dress like a barmaid.

Is she gonna ram us again? thought Hamazura, still reeling from the pain, but that didn't happen:

The girl pulled a lever, and the crane arm extended. Attached to its end wasn't a metal hook designed for lifting up objects.

It was a giant wrecking ball, meters across, for destroying buildings.

“Damn it!!” shouted Mugino, trying to open the rear door. It wouldn’t open, though, because the chassis was twisted.

Hamazura used his own lever to put the passenger seat down. “Out through the windshield!! Hurry!!”

He broke open the slightly fractured front windshield and jumped out onto the hood. Mugino and Takitsubo scrabbled over the passenger seat to get to the front.

And then the iron ball started to swing like a pendulum.

With a low, loud rumble, the giant thing headed straight for them. After Mugino climbed onto the hood, Hamazura panicked while grabbing Takitsubo’s hand to pull her out. But then the iron ball smashed into the car’s side.

A tremendous crash rocked the air.

The impact blew the three off the hood and onto the ground. As Hamazura tried to raise his head, Mugino grabbed the back of it. The next moment, he went fully prone on the ground when the passenger car exploded, shooting flames everywhere. It was a near miracle they were all still alive.

The crane truck’s engine gave an eerie rumble.

It was a reaction that paid no attention to the onlookers who had started to gather after hearing the explosion.

Shizuri Mugino tsked in frustration. “We’re splitting into three.”

“You’re not gonna fight, Level Five?!”

“My goal is that station wagon and the Tweezers it’s carrying. I’m not about to let some grunt buy any more time—and the girl inside has a really annoying power.”

No sooner had she finished than she’d crossed the road and gone into a narrow alley.

Takitsubo, left behind, ran off in another direction.

Hamazura followed suit, thrusting himself into an alley between buildings and running for his life. But behind him,

he heard wet footsteps.

Ah, shit, they caught up!!

His throat dried as he ran. The crane truck's operator was a girl with a small frame, but she was also a member of School, who had fought Item on even terms. He had no clue what kind of savage ability she had. Even Mugino, a Level Five, called it "annoying."

He continued to flee, running up a metal emergency staircase on the side of a building and going into a building on a random floor.

It looked like a student dorm.

He ran down the straight hallway, then heard the click of a door opening behind him.

They've got me…?! thought Hamazura, reflexively looking back.

It was indeed the small girl in the gaudy dress who had come out of the door. She held a handgun with an awfully small grip—it was made for women.

I'm dead!! Hamazura slammed his palm into a wall.

There was a button under it, and a steel shutter to protect against berserk espers dropped down like a guillotine. The girl's eyes widened a little before she swiftly brought her gun up and fired at Hamazura.

Bang, bang!! Two high-pitched shots.

Hamazura instinctively shut his eyes, but when he opened them again, there was no hole in the steel shutter. He looked at the monitor next to the button on the wall and saw the girl click her tongue in annoyance. She checked her gun.

It looked like she didn't have enough firepower to get past this shutter.

…Which means no matter what she tries to do, that woman can't get past this wall.

Relief washed over him.

Then he made the world's greatest look of sheer amusement at someone else's stupidity, raised his hands,

shook his butt, and shouted, “Eee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee--hee!!”

“…”

The girl in the dress, also looking at the monitor on the other side, put her gun away in a thigh holster and then reached behind her.

Her hand came away from her hip with a handgun whose barrel was as thick as a coffee can.

Actually, it was a small .40 grenade launcher.

“Oh. Oh shit…Now I’m gonna die for sure!”

Panicked, Hamazura tried to run farther down the hall, but the girl mercilessly pulled the grenade’s trigger.

The shutter exploded and burst toward him, the fragments sending Hamazura five meters through the air.

“G-gahhh?!”

He somehow got himself up off the floor. Wobbling, holding the wall with one hand, he ran farther down.

Beyond that was a terrace—a dead end.

It didn’t look like the hallway had stairs or an elevator on this end.

Past the railing was a drop about three stories high.

But the unknown girl from School was behind him.

He didn’t need to think twice about his choice.

The three-story dive, absolutely!! Using my guts and willpower to jump is a hundred times better than standing up to someone obviously so strong! The small-fry have their own ways of surviving in this world!!

“Ha-ha!! I’m fine being a looooooooooooseeeeeeeeeeeeer!!” He laughed as he ran, before jumping up onto the railing and leaping off the third story.

He hadn’t looked down before he jumped.

Considering who was chasing him, he hadn’t had time to check. And besides, if he had, he knew he’d be too scared to go through with it.

But three stories was no small height.

Damn, anything down there to cushion my fall?!

He looked down for the first time, in midair, to see a young mother happily pushing a stroller.

As Shiage Hamazura fell through the blue sky, his brain shouted *No!* with all its might.

"Gwooooooooooooooohhhhhhh?!"

He started flapping his arms and legs, trying to airwalk himself out of the way. Fortunately, the move planted his large body five inches from the stroller.

Keee-raaack!! A sharp pain shot through his heels and ankles.

The young mother gracefully put a hand to her mouth in surprise. The baby in the stroller had forgotten to cry—he just stared, eyes wide.

"U-um…Who might you be?"

"The type of hero who falls out of the sky. It's dangerous—please get out of here, miss!" said Hamazura casually with a cool smile, bursting into another alley nearby.

8

"Tsk!!"

The fourteen-year-old in the gaudy dress put away her grenade launcher and handgun, placed her hands on the terrace railing, and glanced down at the road from the third story.

Her target with the stupid expression, the one she'd been chasing, was nowhere to be found.

Only a mother pushing a pram.

The girl took out her cell phone and called one of her allies at School.

"I lost sight of the target. The only thing here is a woman with a stroller…Do you think the target could have disguised himself as a young wife or a stroller?"

"*Piss off, idiot*" came the answer, so the girl ended the call and returned the phone to her pocket.

I let my guard down because I thought he was a nobody. I should have used my ability to begin with…

After one last hateful glance at the road, she gave up and turned around to look for the dorm's elevator.

9

Accelerator and the convertible headed for District 23.

Watching the panicky young man in the driver's seat next to him out of the corner of his eye, he took his phone out of his pocket.

After thinking for a moment, he punched in the three--digit number for reporting crimes to Anti-Skill.

When he held the phone up to his ear, though, he didn't get the operator at Anti-Skill's call center. Somebody else, the "telephone man" giving orders to Group, broke in.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Just figured you'd have to intercept if I called 'em. If you don't like other people manipulating you, maybe change your own actions," he said with a shrug. "Anyway, shit's hitting the fan now. School, or whatever they are—they've been busy, too, eh? Looks like you can't completely control people just by talking to them on the phone, after all. If you couldn't find the time to butt into our business until now, you must be in a lot of trouble."

"Do you really think so?"

"Trying to smooth over your mistakes? Pathetic."

For a brief moment, both Accelerator and the man on the phone were silent.

Eventually, Accelerator got to the point: "The satellites being hijacked—I want their data. Especially *Altair II*. How powerful is the military laser on that thing?"

"Oh, was that all you wanted? I would think you'd want to ask more pressing questions."

"I don't trust you enough to put my life in your hands."

"*A scathing critique*," answered the composed male

voice. *“Strictly speaking, the ‘laser’ on board the* Altair II *is an optical bombing weapon using white light waves. And it’s not currently at a military stage, but an experimental one. It uses four-thousand-degree heat to burn a target, but the white light waves are strong enough to destroy cell nuclei just like ultraviolet rays. It causes a rapid onset of cancer.”*

A fool’s weapon, thought Accelerator, but he didn’t say it. “…Irradiation scope?”

“*It has a five-meter radius at minimum, and three kilometers at maximum. Its rapid-fire capabilities don’t amount to much—you could* maybe *be able to fire it once per hour*,” explained the man airily. *“Also, since the atmosphere refracts the white light in a random fashion, there is something of a variation regarding precision as well. It’s still in the experimental phase, after all.”*

Accelerator said no more and hung up.

He stared at the phone and used the gun in his other hand to prod the driver again, thinking in the convertible’s passenger seat, *It can burn a radius of three kilometers? What the hell are they gonna use that for…?*

Then his phone’s ringtone went off.

He thought it was the telephone man again, but it wasn’t.

“Accelerator…that’s you, right? It’s Unabara.”

He was keeping his voice down—actually, it was like he had his hand over the microphone, making it hard to hear.

“I’m in disguise, so just talking in this voice *is dangerous. I’d like to keep it short.”*

“What, slipping out of School’s sight to whisper some secrets? Sorry, but I ain’t helping you. I have to go stop the satellites from getting hacked. If you’re gonna stop ’em, though, I’ll gladly hear you out.”

“It’s not School.”

“Eh?”

“Right now, I’m with Block, not School. They’re the ones hacking the satellites.”

“…”

According to Unabara, another organization besides School, one called Block, was using this day to plot criminal activity. “What a pain. What the hell happened to School trying to snipe Monaka Oyafune, then?”

“*Please don’t ask me…Wait, sniping?*” repeated Unabara dubiously before getting the conversation back on track. *“They attacked the Virus Storage Center and the external connection terminals beforehand, so Academy City’s network teams are in total confusion. At this rate…they’ll finish the hacking in twenty minutes or so, and* Altair II *will fall into Block’s hands.”*

“Pieces of shit,” spat Accelerator. “…Why doesn’t District 23 shut down satellite control temporarily?”

“They probably have a few reasons. I would imagine they need at least an hour to freeze control if they went by the normal manual process.”

The money that went into space-related business was on a completely different level. He understood they’d incur heavy damages if they cut off their link to their satellites, even temporarily. *But they should’ve cut the lines as soon as they saw the hacking attempt*, he thought with irritation.

“What the hell is Block trying to do with *Altair II*?”

“You’ve probably imagined, but…They want the optical weapon on board.”

“A deal?”

“No, it’s likely to be a direct attack.”

Accelerator swore. “What’s their target?”

“…District 13.”

“District 13?” Accelerator frowned. Tsuchimikado and Musujime were headed to the external connection terminal there now. *Could they be trying to take out Group…?*

He thought about it for a moment, but decided that wasn’t it. They went through all the trouble of hijacking a-satellite—it was too big, and too unsure to do the job. Group wouldn’t necessarily have jumped in to solve an incident if it

happened.

"They're aiming there? The only important place there is the terminal. It's just a clump of kindergartens and elementary schools, isn't it?"

"Yes, but that is their target." Unabara sounded angry in his explanation, and his voice was low and bitter. *"District 13 has the most kindergartens and elementary schools in the city. Attacking it will let them massacre most of the city's youngest residents. What happens then? …Frankly, if I were a parent, I wouldn't want my kids to go there."*

"…"

"Academy City is a city of students. No matter how many people live here, they'll all graduate one day. If they don't have any new students coming in, the population will decrease, and in the end, the city will cease to function."

"…So they want to slowly kill this city over decades?"

In reality, due to all the scientific technology Academy City commanded, from a financial point of view, it wouldn't go down that easily. An Academy City without any children, however, would still be equivalent to taking away its reason for existence.

Accelerator thought for a moment. "Can you stop it from there?"

"If I could, I wouldn't be asking you."

"Can we get everyone in District 13 to evacuate?"

"If we caused a panic, the kids could start falling all over one another throughout the district. And, lest you forget, today is a holiday. The teachers might be able to round up their own kids in the dormitories, but probably not all the ones outside playing."

"Useless. Looks like I'm just gonna have to wreck the ground antenna they use to talk to the satellite."

"*I'll leave it in your hands. Meanwhile, I'll continue gathering information and get as much of it to you as I can*," said Unabara, hanging up.

Accelerator put the cell back in his pocket and looked

ahead at where the convertible was going. *Twenty more minutes, and they'll hijack* Altair II.

The car would get to District 23 in about ten minutes.

It didn't look like he had any time to relax.

"Hurry up. We've got a tight schedule," he said, poking the man with his gun again so he'd understand. The convertible faithfully sped up.

10

Kazari Uiharu and Last Order were on a District 7 station platform. This was apparently Last Order's first time on a train and she wanted to run all over, so Uiharu was holding her hand.

Seriously…Why did this happen to me?

At first, she'd given her the change from the taxi and handed her over to Anti-Skill, but somehow, with some sort of power, Last Order had broken out of the police station before Uiharu knew it and was prowling around the crowds of the city again. Uiharu figured she'd get the same result no matter how many times she left the girl with Anti-Skill, which was why she was helping her look for "the lost child" now.

I wonder what Last Order's ability is.

She'd only asked one question, and that resulted in finding out she had a nickname Uiharu couldn't begin to guess the origin of. Ability names came in two flavors: the simple ones that the school gave you, like *telekinesis* or *electromastery*, and the ones the students gave themselves, like *Railgun*. *She probably decided her own ability name, too*, thought Uiharu offhandedly.

"'Why won't the train come?' asks Misaka asks Misaka, tilting her head in confusion."

"It looks like a freight train is coming through. By the way, where do you think the lost child is right now?"

"'Hmm, well, I feel like he's coming this way,' answers

Misaka answers Misaka, making little frowny lines on her forehead.”

It seemed as though Last Order was using some kind of ability to search for the missing person, but it didn’t appear very precise.

“‘I hope we can find him like this,’ says Misaka says Misaka, down in the dumps.”

“It’ll be okay.”

“‘Thank you for the super-lazy encouragement,’ says Misaka says Misaka, thanking her anyway.”

“So that your silly hair strand perks back up again, I have a present for you.”

“‘What?! You can detach your head flowers at will?!’ says Misaka says Misaka, obviously shocked and stuff!!”

“Here you are. In the language of flowers, the hibiscus means *just give it a try*.”

“‘And now you’re boldly mistaking floral language,’ says Misaka says Misaka, disturbed!!”

Last Order was going on and on, so Uiharu just smiled and nodded.

But then she heard the *vrooooom* of an engine. The young woman looked, but she couldn’t tell what it was. The roar of exhaust told her it was probably a speeding sports car.

“I wonder where they could be going. Hopefully Anti-Skill pulls them over,” she said with a sigh. Meanwhile, Last Order was frowning about something, groaning in thought.

11

Shiage Hamazura burst out of an alley and onto a large road.

Heaving, he stopped and looked around.

Boys enjoying their holiday were giving him dubious stares, but for now, he didn’t see any attackers. He wiped the sweat on his brow, then went to a nearby vending

machine and bought a cold can of oolong tea. Once he drank some, he finally let himself feel relief.

I-I'm alive. For now anyway…I wonder if the higher-up Item girls are okay? Gah. Damn it. I just want to run away from everything and go on vacation.

But then, in an act of coldhearted cruelty, his cell phone rang. He looked at the screen, then moaned.

It was Item's very own Shizuri Mugino.

"*Yo*," she said. *"Since you picked up, I guess you're alive for the moment…Hopefully this isn't a mistake, and you aren't handcuffed with the phone pressed to your ear right now."*

"Yeah, I'm alive…I drew the winning number, so I'm sure you're safe."

"Thanks for that. It made things easy for me. Anyway, sorry, but could you come back right away? We have a lackey kind of job for you."

"A job?" said Hamazura, making a sour face.

Mugino continued—without skipping a beat:

"Got a dead person. I wanted you to deal with it."

12

The convertible with Accelerator in it parked near the District 23 terminal station.

He flung several paper bills at the young, dazed driver and exited the vehicle.

This was District 23's only station.

Many lines connected here, but its freight platform was at the very end. Despite this being a terminus, the lines went farther and farther down. They connected to a switchyard for servicing trains, and if one was carrying a lot of shipping containers, it could unload them there as well.

Accelerator, ever more conscious of his cane impediment, moved along the outside of the station building looking for the ground antenna. He was walking through a container

depository, whose entrance was restricted to anyone not related to it.

A little under ten minutes. The schedule of a big-time artist.

He turned his attention to the electrode on his neck.

The satellite antenna is a few clicks from here, but I won't be able to take a regular train there.

His battery had about thirty minutes left in it. Though he would have liked to keep consumption to a minimum, he was going to have to use it now. Looking for a car at this point would be a hassle—it seemed faster to use his vector--transforming ability.

Accelerator's hand went for the switch on his neck.

"Oh my. We can't have this, now, can we?"

Suddenly, he heard a soft-spoken male voice behind him.

He didn't think anyone had been nearby.

"!!" Accelerator whipped out the gun tucked into his belt and turned around, but nobody was there.

His body wavered slightly on his modern-design cane.

He tried to use the tip of the gun in his left hand to push the electrode switch at his neck.

"I see that's your weakness."

But they grabbed his hand from behind.

"You may have an awfully strong ability, but you can't turn it on unless you flip the switch."

Before Accelerator could shake the hand off, *wham!!*—a heavy impact shot through the side of his head. It didn't feel like a punch from a fist. It was duller, like a metal pipe or a hammer.

He felt goopy liquid dripping down the side of his face.

"Arg! You…You're with Block?!"

"No, no. Not Block—I'm with Member."

The voice from behind him:

Member.

One of the five organizations, same as Group and School.

Shit, one thing after another…!!

“Although our interests don’t align with theirs, I will be stopping you from destroying the satellite’s ground antenna now.”

As his head swam, Accelerator looked behind him, but once again there was nobody there.

But he didn’t hesitate.

Still looking in that direction, he swung out his leg behind him and stomped down on his attacker’s foot. The impact freed up his left hand, and without turning around, he pointed his gun behind him and fired three shots in sequence.

“…?! Damn!!”

After getting the sensation that he’d hit, Accelerator swiftly flipped his neck electrode’s switch from *normal* to *ability usage* mode.

Then he whirled around.

But once again, nobody was there.

After a quick glance at his surroundings, he saw someone standing behind a startled railroad employee who had heard the gunshots and come over.

The man had light wounds, grazes to his side and thigh, both bleeding. His down jacket was torn, and the down inside was stained red. He looked like he was in high school, and he was pressing a big saw against the railroad worker’s neck.

Accelerator snorted. “A teleport esper *who can only go behind other people*? That’s a shitty power. Bet it’s not even Level Four. Even though, if you can teleport your own body weight, you’re normally that high.”

The man growled.

“What a loser. You can’t calculate eleven-dimensional values by yourself. You need to base it on other people’s locations, or else it won’t even activate. That power’s too good for you.”

“…This coming from the one relying on an electrode. In any case, this discussion is over. The professor wants me to do this, so I will stop you here.”

“With a hostage? That’s a shitty shield. Besides, I’m not after you anyway. I’m after the antenna.”

“You wouldn’t abandon a hostage,” snorted his attacker, who Accelerator decided to call Kill Point. “If you would, you wouldn’t be here trying to stop *Altair II* in the first place. If I use another person’s life, you’ll stop, won’t you? And, well, if this isn’t enough, I can make a much bigger sea of blood for you.”

He pressed the saw against the young worker’s neck, causing him to cry out.

“…You lack aesthetic,” said Accelerator, slowly raising his gun. “You have none of the values of a villain.”

“If you want to shoot me, you may want to stop. I do believe your gun has quite a margin for left-right error.”

Now that you mention it, this thing does feel different. When Accelerator had shot at Kill Point when he was right behind him, the youth’s hand had probably messed up the aiming mechanism. He could readjust it if he wanted, but the tense situation didn’t give him any time for casual maintenance.

With Accelerator’s skills, he could easily hit the target even if the sight was somewhat off.

But things changed if he was using a hostage as a shield.

You could act on intuition for some problems, but certainly not for others.

“I see. You’re right—this situation sucks.”

“What will you do, then?”

“This,” he said, pointing the handgun at his own temple.

Before Kill Point had time to think, Accelerator, without hesitation, pulled the trigger.

Bang!!

“Guh…*ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh*?!”

Kill Point keeled over backward.

There was a dark-red hole in his shoulder. He managed to dig down and endure it, but he still fell to the ground.

Accelerator had changed the vector of the bullet he'd shot at his head and directed it at Kill Point.

He waggled the gun in front of him, signaling for the railroad worker to move. The worker complied, rolling aside in a fluster, and then Accelerator pointed the gun forward again.

"Yeah, looks like the gun's aim is off."

His finger rested on the trigger.

"I can fix it by using my body to control its vector. My power is way more precise than this gun's stupid sight."

"Urgh…" Kill Point, face still pointed at Accelerator, used his eyes to observe his surroundings.

Accelerator saw that and sneered. "Go right ahead. I don't care who you warp behind. I'll still shoot you. Wherever you run, my next move will destroy you. So run, you pig. Hope you're impressed enough to be terrified now."

"…!" Kill Point's throat dried.

Accelerator ignored his expression. "Now let me teach you something about aesthetics."

He smiled, then quietly said:

"This is what a first-rate villain looks like, shithead."

Bang bang!! came the gunshots.

Kill Point resisted somewhat, but soon, he was no longer able to move.

13

Shiage Hamazura was in a big, open space.

The job waiting for him after shaking off his School pursuer was a suspicious one involving incineration.

Nobody was using this place at the moment. The building

had been abandoned. For some reason, a giant, thick metal device was placed in the middle of its incomplete floor. About as large as a shipping container, it was an electric furnace used to dispose of experimental animals. Using immense heat, almost 3,500 degrees Celsius, it sterilized and burned their corpses and all sorts of microbes at once.

"…Wonder how it's powered. Seems too large for a wall plug," muttered Hamazura, looking at the big, out-of-place device.

His job was simple.

Open the oversized, steel, safe-like lid by its handle, toss the black sleeping bag inside, close the lid, and turn on the furnace. It had been tuned up beforehand, so all he had to do was press the conspicuously red ignition button.

He was better off not thinking about what was inside the bag. Item's Shizuri Mugino had warned him as much—not that Hamazura wanted to.

Item, School—as a lackey, Hamazura didn't think too much about what these top-secret teams were after. He was only here because he wouldn't survive in this city otherwise.

"…"

But every time he felt the black sleeping bag's oddly vivid weight, every time the spongy sensation came through the thick synthetic fabric and into his palms, he imagined the face of someone he'd never seen before. He forced himself to shrug it off, threw the bag into the furnace, secured the thick metal lid, and locked it.

Now he just had to push the red button.

The electrically created 3,500-degree heat would incinerate the body in minutes, even destroying DNA information, changing a person into nothing but ashes.

Hamazura considered, for a moment, the person in that sleeping bag, but still put his thumb on the button.

The passing thought gave him fear, and the tip of his thumb trembled—before his thumb pressed the button anyway.

Vrrrgg. The “disposal” began with a low rumble.

Hamazura gazed at it for a short while in silence, but he eventually took one step back, then another, then sat down on the dusty floor.

“…”

Who could have been in that sleeping bag?

It could have been a lackey Level Zero like Hamazura, and it could have been a much stronger esper. It wasn’t necessarily a child, but he couldn’t say for certain it was an adult. Was it an enemy? Mugino might even kill an ally if they blundered. He didn’t know the story behind them, and they could have even been entirely unrelated, simply swept up in the chaos.

All of it burned to nothing.

Inside that thick metal machine, the person changed into something else entirely.

The ashes, no longer legally a “person,” would disappear off somewhere. It might end up thrown into some garbage--disposing automation, blended into a mush, and shipped out as fertilizer. Even if someone found the ashes in the garbage, they wouldn’t treat it as a person. The flesh had lost its DNA information, so it couldn’t be used as physical proof.

“Hamazura.”

Even when someone addressed him from behind, Shiage Hamazura couldn’t move.

The electric furnace gave a few shrill beeps, letters coming up on its monitor to indicate the incineration was complete.

“Hamazura, what’s wrong?”

It was probably Rikou Takitsubo, from Item, talking to him.

Her other name was Ability Stalker.

Unlike Hamazura, she was a very powerful Level Four

esper. That power was what had led him astray, but he still envied it more than anything else.

“…What does human life mean?” said Hamazura, letting the energy drain from his body while simply staring at the furnace.

It wasn’t like this was his first time seeing a corpse, and yet he felt considerable pressure in his heart.

“Damn it. When did Level Zero lives get this cheap…?”

He heard a voice say his name.

He stood, ignoring it, then opened the furnace lid and collected the ashes within.

Shiage Hamazura’s job wasn’t over yet.

14

Mitsuki Unabara was in a multi-tenant building in District 10.

The place operated as one of Block’s hideouts.

Right now, there were three official Block members present, along with a dozen or so combat personnel belonging to their ancillary organization. Of course, Mitsuki Unabara had secretly switched places with one of their official members.

“…Not much longer now,” said Tatsuhiko Saku, his big, bearlike body shifting.

A laptop was in front of him. It looked compact, but a cord came out of it and connected to what looked like an overstuffed sandwich. Apparently, it was almost fifteen-store-bought CPUs stacked on top of one another, with liquid cooling tubes running through the gaps between them.

The brawny woman, Teshio, her eyes on the screen, spoke to Saku. “Has it worked?”

“Mostly, yeah. Thanks to the dummy we used on the Virus Storage Center, District 23 thinned out, too.” Saku spoke without looking at his companion. “Now we can say good--

bye to this shitpile of a world with Aleister's stink permeating every last corner. This is our first step in that direction."

He wasn't giving a speech; not many people were particularly listening. He was practically talking to himself.

Even so, Unabara could feel strength in his words.

"But this is just the first step. There's a long way to go before reaching our goal, but still, it's the first step."

"…" Unabara casually glanced over at the clock on the wall. It would only be a few more minutes before the satellite was hijacked.

He'd gotten no message from Accelerator. He didn't know if he'd managed to destroy the ground antenna. Unabara turned his attention to his inside pocket, thinking on the Spear of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli within.

…I could just destroy that computer, but if I do, it would be at the cost of my life.

His palms began to clam up with perspiration.

He didn't have much time to make a decision.

But then, Megumi Teshio said, "It would appear, there has been some action, in District 23. A number of on-site-Anti-Skill officers, have gone down. But as far as I can tell, from intercepting communications, there is no danger to their lives, the likes of which, would cause rescue teams any confusion."

Everyone there looked at the woman.

"We can understand, by connecting the points, at which the Anti-Skill officers went down, that they're lined up, straight from the terminal station, to the ground antenna. Such incredible speed. It certainly doesn't seem, like he walked."

"Who, and from where?" asked Saku.

"Nobody honest, I'm sure. Is it one of Aleister's dogs, part of Member?"

"No," said Teshio simply. "Group, most likely. I remember, that white-haired kid. If I recall correctly, he's the Level

Five esper, who came here recently.”

…She remembers seeing him? wondered Unabara, but the question was soon answered.

Teshio had a small business instrument in her hand, a device with somewhat more functionality than a cell phone. And on its screen was a rough video, probably taken by a telescope.

According to the number in the corner, it was magnified four thousand times. One of Block’s subordinates was probably outside District 23 recording it right now.

On the monitor, it showed Accelerator heading for the ground antenna.

With his ability, destroying the twenty-five-meter-across parabola would be as easy as swatting a fly.

And he didn’t think Block was about to wait quietly for it to happen.

Not good—or wait, maybe it’s fine…? Even if he was captured, they couldn’t accurately snipe him from that range.

“What now?” asked Megumi Teshio curtly, awaiting instructions.

Everyone’s gaze turned to Saku’s bear-like frame.

“That much is obvious,” came the reply, not particularly hurried, sending tension through Unabara.

They had a plan to deal with him.

Could there be a wireless bomb or something set up near the ground antenna? he thought, before the bear of a man gave a different answer.

“We just have to pray that he succeeds.”

For a moment, Mitsuki Unabara couldn’t understand it.

But soon his thoughts recovered.

*No…*That *was their aim?!*

“Breaking through District 23 would have been too difficult for our abilities. Still, we can’t get anywhere while

that ground antenna is still up. We needed a more capable idiot to help us."

"Actually, we might have been, thinking too much. The Level Five is, already at the antenna."

"Someone watching from 'above' probably cleared the way for him. The district is loaded with air force-related weapons. Normally, unmanned weapons, namely HsAFH-11 attack helicopters, would have gone to intercept him. 'Course, that Level Five could probably wipe them out, too."

We were so preoccupied with the optical weapon on board that we forgot Altair II*'s main usage—to monitor Academy City and the surrounding areas…Taking away that ground antenna doesn't only disable its ability to attack—it paralyzes all its surveillance functions, too!!*

Unabara's thoughts went to the cell phone in his pocket, but no matter how he looked at it, he couldn't get away to contact anyone.

Teshio's eyes went to Saku. "They're actually useful, right? The ones standing by, outside the wall, of District 11?"

"This is one project those kinds of guys are the right choice for. What? You're not worried about getting unrelated people wrapped up in this, are you?"

The big man stopped the hacking program on his laptop, which they no longer needed, then turned the machine off and tossed it to one of the underlings.

"Let's go. Five thousand mercenaries are waiting on the other side of that wall."

October 9, 1:29 PM.

With the destruction of the ground antenna that communicated with the satellites, they all lost function.

Academy City, without its surveillance system in the skies, had lost a significant chunk of its defenses.

INTERLUDE TWO

School’s Level Five esper, Teitoku Kakine, was in District 4.

The district was home to many eateries, even in Academy City, with a host of other facilities related to food as well. He had hidden their station wagon in one of them, a meat freezer warehouse.

“No sign of Item. I guess they got away for now.”

Kakine opened the station wagon’s rear door and checked inside.

There was no frozen meat. Instead, there was a giant metal box the size of a small closet.

“…So these are the Tweezers…,” groaned the driver, one of School’s subordinates.

A grin came to Kakine’s face. “Superfine object interference absorption manipulators. In short, mechanical fingers that can grab tiny particles smaller than atoms. That’s why they’re called Tweezers.”

All matter in the world was composed of several elementary particles combined with one another. The Particle Physics Institute had apparently been running experiments where they purposely removed elementary particles from objects to create unstable matter.

Normal robotic arms had a hard time grabbing anything smaller than atoms. But with the Tweezers, they created a way to “suck them out” using magnet force, light waves, and electricity.

“But one wrong step and they could have caused an

atomic collapse.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” said Kakine. “Getting a new sniper to replace the one Item killed, shooting Oyafune—a lot of work went into this, but it seems like we got a lot out of it. That’s a relief.”

The driver stared at the big device for a few moments. “But what on earth are you going to do now that you’ve stolen it?”

“What do you mean, what? Exactly what it’s meant for. I want to grab something really small. *It’ll give me a way to break through to Aleister.*”

“???” The driver looked confused, but Kakine didn’t bother to explain more. He opened a toolbox in the station wagon’s trunk, took out a screwdriver, and started loosening the Tweezers’ screws.

“A-are you going to break it?”

“I’m making it better,” said Kakine, annoyed. “You want to know why this thing’s so big? It’s to prevent theft. If you just had the bare minimum parts, you could make it smaller.”

The clacking sounds continued for a while.

Soon, the Tweezers were remade, changed into its original, optimized form.

Kakine now held what looked like a metal glove. Long,-glass-like nails came out of the index finger and middle finger, and inside the nails were even smaller parts that appeared to be metal stakes. There was a small monitor the size of a cell phone screen on the back of the hand.

From what it looked like, it extracted elementary particles from the glass nails, then performed measurements with the metal stakes.

“Y-you can make it that small?”

“Well, it’s brand-spanking-new Academy City tech. If they go too far, that’s their problem, eh?” answered Kakine, putting the glove on his right hand and checking it. “Great,

feels good…Contact the others. We're moving to the next phase."

"Right away," nodded the driver, and that was when it happened:

Ba-geen!! A sharp, metallic sound rang out through the warehouse.

Kakine and the driver looked over to see a square hole cut into the thick warehouse wall like a door. Bright midday sunlight shone in through it, as the dismembered section of wall fell inward.

Nobody was outside.

But the attacker was definitely aiming for them.

"Gyah…*Gwahhhhhhhhhh?!*" the driver screamed suddenly.

Kakine looked over just as the skin on the driver's face disappeared. Then his fat and muscle disappeared, too, in that order, and in the end even his brain vanished as well, leaving only clothing and bones to fall to the ground.

The clattering sound was light, like plastic.

Kakine frowned slightly.

"Teitoku Kakine? It would be a waste to lose a Level Five right now."

A voice from an unclear direction came to Kakine's ears.

Staying alert in all directions, he activated the Tweezers he'd just finished rebuilding. *Didn't think I'd have to use it so soon.* "…Group, is it? Or maybe Item?"

"Unfortunately, I'm with Member. By the way, young man, have you ever smoked a cigarette before?" The-middle-aged male voice, source unknown, was calm. "You know how when you take one out of the box, you tap the box with your finger? When I was a child, I didn't understand the point. Still, it made a fine show. That's why I started tapping on my boxes of cookies."

"Yeah?"

"That's exactly what you're doing right now."

"Talking down to me? Looks like you really want me to

make your corpse a good one."

A mechanical blip came from the Tweezers equipped to his right hand.

He looked at the monitor, and among the air particles it had gathered were, it seemed, little droplets of machines. Something clearly artificial had mixed into the electron--microscopic world.

"Nanodevices? You plucked out every single cell he had."

"No, *mine* aren't that excessive. They don't have circuits, or power. They're simple granules of reflective alloy; they only show a specific reaction in response to specific frequencies. I call them the Bowing Images, though."

The middle-aged male voice, which he still couldn't locate, continued, tone vaguely annoyed. "But if you use several frequencies, you can control it, kind of like using a television remote to control a radio-controlled car. Normally, I attach them to bacteria in the air, and let the bacteria disperse naturally."





Whooshing noises surrounded Teitoku Kakine.

His eyes darted all around, but before he could find an escape route, the Bowing Images attacked.

Member's "Professor," having taken the mechanical beast along with him, stood relaxed outside the freezer warehouse. In his hand, on a small device, it showed the operation status of the program controlling the Bowing Images.

Right then, he was in a bazaar built along the sidewalk. In that area, you could only park your car on the road if it was for business use; food trucks, such as crepe stands, lined the street.

The mechanical beast next to him spoke. "Our superiors' information was right. He was in the District 4 freezer warehouse."

"That goes to show how strong they are. Academy City is their territory. It's spilling over with strange technology. There's nowhere to run, no matter how much we struggle."

He took a bite into a tropical fruit, red enough to seem poisonous, and continued quietly, "It was my twelfth winter when I lost all hope in the arts."

The mechanical beast listened quietly to the professor's words.

"I admired European architecture. I was in love with the scale, of using so much time and manpower to construct a work of art, to complete just one piece of beauty. But at the same time, I found it hard to understand. It's easy to gaze at the outside of a building and say how beautiful it is. But when you try to understand the design in-depth, down to its fundamental layers, you need a ton of time because of the building's scale. Quite frankly, it's tiring—there are too many points of interest."

"Is that why you discovered a connection with mathematics?"

"Indeed," the professor said, nodding. "Ah, numerical formulae. They have no excess, they're like machines, they

hold a rainbow of aesthetic in the smallest space possible. The very formulae have an artistic beauty, but also the poetic beauty of a haiku. And all these aesthetics can be enjoyed just by unraveling a single line, leaving nothing left over…I want to find the beauty hidden in the world's crevices, to take that wonderful beauty and cherish and adore it. I would throw myself at the feet of my worst enemies to do so—even if it meant others calling me Aleister's dog."

The professor looked at his wristwatch.

His Bowing Images would be almost finished eliminating the hostile.

Aleister probably wouldn't look kindly upon him bringing down the second-place Level Five, but if he made a new Level Five in his place, it would solve the problem.

"Let's get going. We need to retrieve the Tweezers and crush the other official members from the rebellious School, and then our job is done."

"What about our own Saraku going down near the District 23 terminal station?"

"If I recall, Accelerator was calling him Kill Point. Well, if he's not dead, we can leave him be. If you have time, you should retrieve him," said the professor.

But the mechanical beast didn't answer.

Because, with an explosive *boom*…

…the freezer warehouse burst apart from within, into tiny pieces.

The extreme force shattered all the windows in the surrounding buildings. People screamed, ran around in a frenzy trying to escape, causing minor chaos among the food trucks at the bazaar.

The dust billowed up.

Teitoku Kakine pierced through the cloud, slowly walking over to them.

There wasn’t a scratch on his body.

Not one.

“Yo. You said you lost hope when you were twelve, right?”

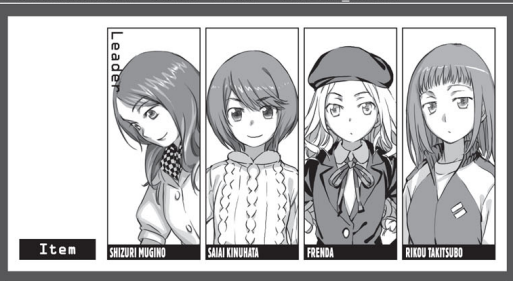
The professor frantically gave orders to his Bowing Images, but he got no response. The explosion had cleared away the particles in the air, and his nearby airborne Images had been blown far away.

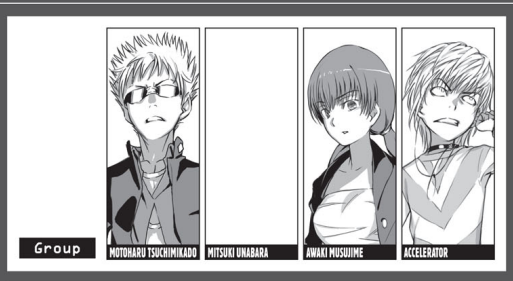
Kakine looked at the professor’s desperate expression and chuckled.

As he chuckled, he said this:

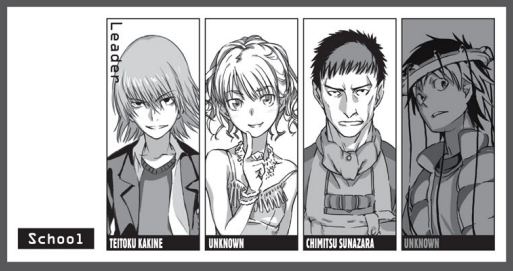
“Time to lose hope again, asshole.”

Transmission data from "UNDER_LINE"











Transmission data from "UNDER_LINE"

CHAPTER 3

In a Land Where Abilities Are Forbidden

Reformatory.

1

A cold sweat broke out all over Yoshio Baba.

He was in Member, just like the professor. He'd been remotely controlling a quadrupedal walking robot to support said professor, but…

"That bastard…Damn you! How could you die so quickly?!" he swore.

But a dead man wasn't going to help him. He tsked, then began preparing to withdraw. He was in School District 23—in an underground town under development hundreds of meters belowground, a nuclear shelter for VIPs called Summer Resort. Originally, it was the private property of one of the General Board members, but they almost never used it, so Baba had taken it upon himself to disable the security systems and make himself at home. The "resort" had grand, villa-like furnishings, and even a special line for Net conferencing. It was a wonderful environment for Baba, a hacker. He'd had his eyes on it for a while, but getting to actually experience it that day was really something else.

But this wasn't a perfectly safe place, either.

The enemy's ability was unknown, but if it was a form of teleportation, the walls' thickness wouldn't do him much good. The person to easily kill the professor had been one of only seven Level Five espers in Academy City. Someone like

that could tear open the shelter door with brute force. Plus, it was possible they'd bring some brand-new equipment, like an anti-bulkhead shotgun.

They'll notice this place soon. All I can do is get out before that happens!!

He stuffed several devices, most importantly a laptop computer, into his bag. Then, after grabbing a sheaf of papers preserved inside the Summer Resort on the way, he headed for the exit elevator.

But when he pushed the button, there was no response.

"…?"

He headed for the door to the staircase instead, but that was locked, too, and wouldn't open.

Then the lighting in the shelter changed to bright red. Dumbfounded, Baba looked at the control monitor for shelter safety. On it was displayed "For safety reasons, all locks have been set."

When Baba's eyes nearly popped out of his head, he began to hear something strange:

*Shhhhhhhhhhhhh…*It sounded almost like a waterfall.

It was considerably loud. After all, it was coming through the shelter's thick walls.

"Water…?!"

Terrible images raced through Yoshio Baba's mind.

If someone had used a fire hose or something and was pouring tons of water into the elevator shaft or underground stairs…

With such an immense water pressure against every door in the shelter, neither human hands nor the monitor's automatic controls could make them move again. And even if they did open, an overwhelming devastation from terrible quantities of water would be waiting for him.

There had been a teleport-type esper in Member, Saraku —whom Accelerator called Kill Point—but he'd been taken down in District 23 already, too. He wouldn't save him from this situation.

“Damn!!”

Baba frantically took the laptop out of his bag and booted it up, before connecting to the Net conference line and contacting another person in Member. Now that the professor and Kill Point were gone, he only had one ally left —a girl the professor had dubbed a sorcerer.

But the answer from his ally, who had learned of things through text messages, was very simple.

“The data you were collecting on the other organizations was saved on another server, right? I just need that, not you. I’m chasing down my own enemies—I don’t have time to wipe your ass for you.”

“You piece of shit!!” exclaimed Baba out of reflex. He considered abandoning all shame and reputation and calling their ancillary organization or the “voice on the telephone” for help, but then his laptop screen suddenly froze. A bad premonition began to set in as he tried to get it working again, but the cable for the line must have been physically cut. That was why the information stopped updating.

He pulled the cord out of the laptop and wailed. He tried to force himself to think optimistically, but no matter how he tried, he always returned to the same answer.

He was trapped.

As Baba admitted that fact to himself, the thick walls, which had seemed reliable before, came at him from all directions with a dark pressure. How many rations were down here? Was there enough oxygen? When would help arrive? Would help ever arrive?

With his panic accelerating just from the whirling images in his mind, he eventually slammed his bag on the floor, tore at his hair with his hands, and screamed like an animal.

In the safest place in the world, which actually had enough oxygen and food to last him another year without trouble, Yoshio Baba’s mind began to disintegrate, eaten alive by the beast called imagination.

2

School District 11.

Since Academy City wasn't on the sea, goods could only come to it two ways: by land or air. And District 11, which was on the outer wall, served as a front door to the largest of those land routes.

That was where the members of Block, including Mitsuki Unabara, were.

Squared-off buildings were lined up around him. Unlike normal buildings, these had no walls, which made them look like parking garages. Academy City–made self-driving electric cars waited inside for shipments.

District 11 exchanged over seven thousand metric tons of goods per day, and its "town of warehouses" was immense.

Control near the gates directly managing entry and exit was very strict, but they couldn't keep an eye on every nook and cranny of the warehouse town. This district probably closely resembled a pier at a normal port. Just like the fondly remembered mafia movies of old, it was quite often used as a spot for shady deals, night after night.

And…

So that's the outer wall…

Unabara directed his gaze at it.

Despite being easily over five hundred meters away, the wall was giant, palpably displaying its grandeur. Like the Great Wall of China, there was a path on top of the wall, and if you checked with binoculars, you'd see oil drum–shaped security robots going back and forth.

Certain sorcerers had climbed over the outer wall. However, that was because the wall's security was protected by *scientific* sensors, and tended to be weak to *magical* ploys (…or, at least, Unabara wanted to believe that. He didn't want to think Aleister's calculations went that far, and that he was toying with them).

Presently, though, because their satellite-based surveillance was gone, the security had grown incredibly weak. Now, even regular people who didn't use magical means would have a chance.

Five thousand mercenaries, summoned by Saku, would be waiting on the other side.

They'd probably been waiting for Academy City's satellite security to cut out, hiding in nearby buildings or scattered cars.

Yet despite knowing that, Unabara was never blessed with the chance to relay that information.

Those in Group didn't know of this place. Even the city's higher echelons might not have figured it out. They'd personally resolved the immediate threat of attack from the satellite, so it was likely they felt relieved.

Block's objective is to let those mercenaries in and do… what? Where on earth do they plan to attack…?

"Yamate. Are you, worried about something?" asked Megumi Teshio suddenly from nearby.

Yamate was the name of the man Unabara was disguised as. "No…," he answered shortly.

Normally, he did at least a week-long investigation of the person he would impersonate. He couldn't make any careless remarks before he knew more about his model's personality.

Teshio didn't seem to think much of Unabara's attitude, either.

She'd probably decided he was nervous, since they were in the middle of a huge operation.

"Sure, we got rid of the satellites, but those security robots are still up and rolling around," said Tatsuhiko Saku.

Teshio turned to face the bearlike man. "Is there, a problem?"

"Nah. Those bots don't have any firearms, so they won't be an obstacle. We just have to get the timing right, and they can cross the wall."

“Why *aren’t* they armed?” asked Unabara, deciding to get into the conversation.

Saku glanced at him. “Bunch of reasons. The robots up there are always protecting the periphery. They can’t risk malfunctions causing them to shoot people walking around outside the wall. Then there’s the ammunition issue. That type of robot isn’t designed to swap out magazines, so once it runs out, that’s it.”

“Then even if they are spotted, they would only, trigger an alarm?” said Megumi Teshio, sounding deflated. “In that case, instead of going through the work, couldn’t we have just, staged a brute-force breakthrough?”

“Nope. Those outer wall security bots have a special comm line. Once the warning comes in, they’ll send a message directly to District 23 control and call in their unmanned attack helicopters. Right now, the main one being the Hexawing, a brand-new model that showed up at the interception weaponry show. If they get spotted, we’ll have problems.”

Saku glanced at the watch around his thick arm. “In ten minutes, the security robots on the wall will rotate out.”

“…”

“They run on electricity, after all. They can’t operate-twenty-four hours a day, so they’ve gotta recharge somewhere. Which means the ones currently operating will naturally split away from the ones recharging.”

Because of this guard rotation, once per day, a twenty- to thirty-minute gap would open up in the robot-based wall security.

Typically, that wouldn’t be a problem.

Because normally, Academy City’s satellites kept a-never-ending watch over the city and its periphery.

But not right then.

Those twenty minutes would turn into a full-blown blackout.

“Get as many cars as possible. And don’t forget to swap

their license plates," instructed Tatsuhiko Saku to Block's underlings. "The electric self-driving cars for planned shipment parked in the garages—we need to transport five thousand people in them, after all."

3

The twenty minutes of blackout began.

In the District 11 warehouse town, surrounded by squarish parking garage buildings, Mitsuki Unabara directed his attention to the obsidian knife in his inside pocket.

He wouldn't get the chance to contact Accelerator and Group.

Even if he did so right now, there was no guarantee they'd come running here right away.

From what he'd gleaned by eavesdropping on Tatsuhiko Saku's radio chatter, the mercenaries were throwing ropes up the wall to secure a path. And Unabara could already see several scaling the wall by peering through binoculars an "ally" had handed him.

…I have to do it, he thought.

The Spear of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli reflected Venus's light, then dismantled whatever that light touched. It was a projectile spell. As long as the light directly hit, it would break apart any kind of matter, but he couldn't aim for multiple targets at the same time.

The problem is finding where to aim that one attack.

There were five thousand mercenaries in total.

Aiming the Spear at them wouldn't mean much. It would just reduce the number of perpetrators to 4,999.

He could aim at Block's official members.

…Taking down Saku, the commander, would have some effect, but now that their plan had already progressed this far, losing their leader probably wouldn't completely stop them.

I need a more effective point…, thought Unabara, taking his eyes from the binoculars. *A target that would bring this all to a halt in one strike…*

He then averted his gaze from the climbing mercenaries and set it in a completely different direction.

An intense tremble ran through him, but he didn't have the time to hesitate.

…It's there*!!*

He slipped his obsidian knife out.

The light of Venus reflected toward…

…the parking garage right next to them.

Although Tatsuhiko Saku and Megumi Teshio saw him bring out the obsidian knife, they just stared blankly. They had no knowledge of sorcery, so they didn't understand what he was doing.

But when Unabara suddenly broke out into a run toward the building, and then the parking garage began to collapse without warning, they put two and two together.

A sharp *ba-keen* rang out.

The reinforced concrete parking garage in Unabara's path began to break into pieces, as though the pillars supporting it were being pulled out one by one. Every time one of the building fragments collided with the ground, it smashed the asphalt and whipped up clouds of dust.

"What…? *Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaamate!!*"

Unabara heard Saku's scream from behind.

The sound of several guns being leveled at him followed.

Unabara ignored them and ran.

With clatters and rumbles, the giant concrete fell at him like a cave-in. The pieces actually shielded Unabara's back from the rain of gunfire. A self-driving electric car, crushed in midair, stabbed into the ground with its sharp cross section. The only good thing was the lack of an explosion, since it didn't use gasoline.

Unabara pointed the obsidian knife down.

Venus's light destroyed the ground. He jumped down into a sewer to try to protect himself from the concrete falling above.

However, there were so many fragments that they began to crush the sewer itself, quickly approaching Unabara.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

He ran, tumbling, then actually tripped and fell, but still got up and crawled forward.

Eventually, the rumble of the parking garage's collapse ended.

The impact had damaged every part of this sewer; the area behind him was blocked, of course, but even in front of him was collapsed, too.

The ceiling had crumbled, and bright light shone in from above.

Unabara looked up at the dusty-blue sky as he grabbed a ruined wall with his hands and climbed up.

There, he saw…

4

District 23's air control center received an emergency signal from District 11 near the outer wall.

But the unmanned helicopters wouldn't immediately launch from there. It was possible the signal was incorrect. Final judgment was left to an operator, who would personally connect the line's plug and input the command. Only then would the helicopters take defensive action.

Normally, there was a complicated manual, dozens of pages long, waiting.

But the control center, having temporarily lost hold of the satellites, had taken up a special security status. The operator didn't do a single check against the manual before promptly pushing the plug in and issuing the dispatch order.

Three unmanned attack helicopters were standing by on the vast asphalt ground.

They were HsAFH-11s, code-named Hexawings.

When they got the order, they increased the rotational frequency of their blades and slowly lifted off.

5

The unmanned Hexawings flew through the air above District 11.

They were similar to AH-64 Apaches, with “wings” along either side of the fuselage for loading machine guns and missiles.

The definition of a helicopter is an aircraft that generates lift using rotors attached on its vertical axis and uses the angle of those “wings” to move.

By that definition, you could certainly call the Hexawing a helicopter.

However, whether or not you could really call the Hexawing a helicopter—when it contained two rocket engines as auxiliary power sources and could, at max speed, reach Mach 2.5—was up for debate.

The unmanned attack helicopters’ arithmetic processors first confirmed the collapse of the parking garage, and then the group of suspicious persons scaling the outer wall of Academy City just a few hundred meters away.

There were about five thousand.

Acknowledging them as hostiles, their processors quickly and automatically began to attack.

“Damn that Yamate bastard…!!” shouted Tatsuhiko Saku bitterly as the Hexawings moved.

With a metallic *ga-shoo*, the wings on either side of the machines split into three. They were indeed six-winged, and the slender wings even had joints in them. They pointed their weapons in six different directions with movements

like human arms.

“Here they come!!” shouted Megumi Teshio.

The Hexawings’ machine guns began to wail.

It was less a rake of gunfire and more a series of blasts.

Megumi Teshio dove behind the station wagon they’d been using, but then the shield took the machine gun fire, becoming dented and misshapen. An orange glow engulfed the vehicle, and a moment later, the whole thing blew. Teshio was sent flying meters back, but after hitting the ground, she ran off to look for another shield.

“Frictional bullet tips?!”

Super-heat-resistant metallic bullets, with special grooves in them so they could use air resistance to heat up to 2,500 degrees Celsius. When one hit armor, it would quickly burn up circuitry and fuel from within.

Hundreds of meters in front of her, the helicopters had begun their attack on the mercenaries scaling the outer wall as well.

Whole groups blasted apart like popped balloons. It was so terrible that she could see the crimson splashes even from her distance. Other mercenaries who were safe were pushed by the force of the blasts and starting falling off. They were strafing the ones who could counterattack first.

At this rate, they’d kill everyone.

Megumi Teshio shouted over to Tatsuhiko Saku, who was some distance away. “The mercenaries, should give up!! They may be moving, as a large group, but from above, they’re nothing but a giant target!!”

“There’s five thousand of them! How hard do you think we worked for this single moment?! Are you telling us to let it go to waste?!”

“They mistakenly think, they’ve been betrayed, anyway. The ones, on the other side of the wall, won’t be coming now. We’re getting, the ones who fell inside, and leaving!!”

“Yamate, you bastard…I’ll kill you, I swear it!!” bellowed Saku from his thick throat.

“Ha-ha…I should have expected as much from lethal weapons that cost two hundred fifty billion yen each…,” muttered Unabara to himself, having crawled out of the sewers and behind some rubble. He was the one who’d done it, but the scene was still spine-chilling.

He looked into the distance and saw several groups hoisting anti-air missiles on their shoulders and firing them.

But the Hexawings fired things that looked like softballs at the missiles. Iron sand exploded from them, and a high--tension current went through. An entire area, twenty meters square, turned into an electrical current zone, the missiles flying into it exploded of their own accord.

In response to the attack, the Hexawings fired a barrage of anti-surface missiles, transforming the entire plane into a sea of crimson flames.

For now, it looks like I prevented the mercenaries’ entrance as much as I could, but…

Unabara pressed his back to a giant concrete chunk and covered his face with his hands.

He ripped away the protective skin talisman he’d used to create the false countenance of Yamate and pulled his Mitsuki Unabara face back on. A moment later, his entire physique and voice, not just his face, had switched to a different person.

He didn’t need the Block’s face anymore.

The problem is how to survive this. Those Hexawings’ arithmetic processors probably won’t object to labeling me an enemy, too.

For now, the Hexawings’ objective was the elimination of the soldiers scaling the outer wall.

If he stayed hidden until they left, the helicopters would leave on their own, but…

A *brat-rat-rat-rat-rat* sound splitting the air squeezed Unabara’s heart.

He looked out from behind the rubble and saw a Hexawing taking aim at him.

“I suppose it won’t be…that easy!!” he shouted, no sooner than jumping out and swinging his obsidian knife.

It reflected Venus’s light, triggered the Spear of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, and broke apart the Hexawing in a surprise attack.

Another Hexawing, notified of what happened, pointed one of its wing-mounted machine guns at him. It was positioned so that its flank was facing him, but that didn’t pose an issue. Its six-jointed guns aimed at Unabara.

The Spear of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli could break any object apart.

However, it couldn’t aim for multiple targets at once.

“Argh!!”

He quickly tried to dive behind cover, but the helicopter was far, far faster.

The Hexawings he’d called here were trying to blow him to bits.

So this is the end…!!

Unabara brought up his obsidian knife, knowing it was futile, but before he could do anything—

Bang!!

A white-haired Level Five dropped down hard on top of the unmanned helicopter. He grabbed the fast-spinning rotors and stopped them. The Hexawing couldn’t deal with such an insane action, and it fell to the ground and exploded everywhere.

“He” came walking slowly out of the flames.

The tension finally left Mitsuki Unabara’s body. “Accelerator…”

“Heard something was goin’ on near the outer wall, so I came. Man, what a shit show,” said Accelerator, sounding bored, returning his electrode switch to normal and leaning on his cane. “Looks like Tsuchimikado and Musujime cleaned things up at the external connection terminal, and I thought busting their satellite antenna would put an end to things. And now control is crying there’s some invaders

making a mess of things on the outskirts."

"Ha-ha. I suppose you realized they were using you, too."

"You didn't call the Hexawings for no reason, yeah? Where's Block?"

"They got away," said Unabara, wiping his sweat. "I think they brought about a hundred of the mercenaries from outside."

"From outside…Damn it, that's what the satellite thing was for? Block, Member, mercenaries…Too many shitheads running around," grumbled Accelerator, realizing he'd been played. "Still, didn't think we'd let people break in. What a bunch of useless idiots."

"To be fair, they said they had about five thousand at first."

"Here's a neat little expression. A miss is as good as a mile."

A Hexawing sliced through the sky, interrupting him.

This time, though, it wasn't aiming at them.

After a general scan of the area, the last remaining helicopter began to fly back toward District 23.

"Looks like they're done cleaning up."

"They probably don't want their allies breaking another one," said Unabara, shrugging. "They apparently cost two hundred fifty billion each."

6

Motoharu Tsuchimikado, Accelerator, Awaki Musujime, and Mitsuki Unabara all met up in the District 11 warehouse town. Mitsuki Unabara, who had been out of the loop until now, asked Tsuchimikado, "What's an 'external connection terminal'?"

"Just some building. The paperwork would have been a pain, and they wouldn't answer us, so Musujime and I blew up their core. Anyway, there's three more terminals, so there shouldn't be any issues with the access situation."

Musujime, who had been with Tsuchimikado, asked Unabara, “Should I take this to mean Block were the masterminds behind these incidents? I think I remember School being the ones behind the attempted Monaka Oyafune assassination.”

“It doesn’t seem like Block and School were directly cooperating,” he replied. “The two organizations were acting on their own, causing those incidents independently. Although, they probably had some contact due to Management’s introductions and such.”

“Shit. Member’s been crawling around, too. This is getting out of hand.”

As Tsuchimikado listened to Unabara and Accelerator, he moved his gaze elsewhere.

Blood and flesh were sprayed around the outer wall, but survivors still remained. Mercenaries unable to die, unable to run—and not recovered by Block, either.

“All right, question time,” said Tsuchimikado bluntly. “What were you five thousand mercenaries going to attack?”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“Five thousand may sound like a lot, but it’s not enough to take down Academy City. Tell us your *business* here, mercenary. What was this plan of yours that needed so many people?”

“…” The mercenary looked at the four members of Group in turn. He seemed to be mentally at a loss. He hesitated, looking at this disaster, wondering if his Block allies had failed or if they’d been planning on betraying them all along. Eventually, he opened his mouth and spoke.

“…School District 10.”

“District 10?”

With the cheapest land prices in the city, it was home to all sorts of unsavory facilities, like abandoned animal testing sites and nuclear power-related laboratories.

The mercenary continued, “We planned to attack the

juvenile reformatory there.”

“!!” Awaki Musujime grabbed the mercenary’s collar. “Why attack a place like that…? Trying to save some VIP criminals, were you?!”

Accelerator, staring at Musujime being driven by impatience, took the time to think.

Academy City’s juvenile reformatory was a facility for holding criminals who had used abilities during their crime. Nobody knew the details, but he’d heard stories that they had anti-esper measures there. That meant a regular military combat force would have a much higher success rate for an assault.

The mercenary Musujime was holding by the collar eventually said, “Our target…was Move Point.”

Her eyebrow twitched.

The mercenary didn’t seem to have any idea who the girl in front of him was.

“We heard…that Move Point’s allies are being held there. We wanted to capture them…and use them to negotiate with Move Point.”

Why did they bring up that name in particular? thought Musujime to herself. She soon realized the answer. “The guide…to the Windowless Building where Aleister is…”

“Yeah. The guide’s identity is top secret. They’re directly linked to Aleister, after all. But Block found out that Move Point was the guide. So we decided to investigate her, then get resources we could use to bargain.”

“What did you want to bargain with the guide for?” asked Tsuchimikado.

“For info on how goods get inside—the Windowless Building, that is,” the mercenary answered. “Even nukes can’t destroy it from the outside, but what about from the inside? They say it has no entrance or exit, but they have to be bringing goods in and out somehow. We were going to use that and blow the Windowless Building apart from within.”

“Blow it apart?”

“Block said they had procured multi-synchronous bombs. You’re all tactical weapons made by Academy City, right?”

Multi-synchronous bombs were large-scale bombs where you systematically set up multiple high explosives. While normal tactical weapons tried to make ever more massive blasts that would spread out farther, multi-synchronous bombs aimed to focus the high-energy blasts on a single, extremely small target and destroy it thoroughly. They were devised to blow up enemy fortresses in urban areas without causing civilian casualties.

“We had to stop the worldwide chaos. I’m a mercenary by trade, so I understand: The world is on the brink. Strife is going to start all over soon. Wars have to be stopped before they happen.”

The mercenary looked at each of the faces in Group in turn.

“It would have been too much to ask for Move Point herself to join us. Anyone you can’t trust—well, you can never trust them in the future, either. We wouldn’t pursue that very far. If the info is right about Move Point’s ability, things would have gone much easier with her cooperation, but it’s one thing we couldn’t do anything about. We assumed we wouldn’t get her cooperation to begin with—”

“You’re right about that,” interrupted Musujime. “By the way, do you know who’s standing in front of you right now?”

“What?” said the mercenary, frowning—before his face went beet-red a moment later. “N-no, that can’t be, that’s not…!!”

Before he could finish speaking, there were almost ten iron nail-like objects pierced through his body.

He lost consciousness because of the shock from the pain, but he still seemed to be alive. Musujime let go of the ragged mercenary and stood there, head down, clenching her teeth.

That which she wanted to protect most—that which she

had to protect no matter the cost—was being stolen away at this very moment. In the face of that, the other three were silent. Each carried something similar, so they said nothing.

Aleister was probably using some unknown tech to watch all this from on high. And though he watched, he wouldn't want to intervene. He was, without a doubt, watching and laughing at the little people floundering in the miniature garden he'd created.

"Let's go."

Eventually, Tsuchimikado prompted the group onward.

Everything to come wouldn't be a Group problem but an Awaki Musujime problem. But nobody was willing to point that out. The situation had changed from each Group individual having to overcome the hardships that came with their own assignments by themselves, like it had been for Unabara when he was within Block's ranks.

"To District 10. Block's still got almost a hundred mercs with 'em. We don't know what they're armed with, but one thing's certain: We can't be optimistic about this."

7

Accelerator and the rest of Group used a transport ambulance to get out of District 11. Their destination: a certain juvenile reformatory in District 10.

"This is the only juvenile reformatory in Academy City. Looks like it's split half and half, with a boys' block and a girls' block," said Tsuchimikado, pressing a few buttons on his laptop. "Academy City doesn't consider treason a crime right now. That means Musujime's allies can't be legally sentenced. They wouldn't put people like that into one of the normal houses."

"Which means…there must be a hidden room?" Unabara looked at Musujime, but she didn't seem to know.

"What a pain," muttered Accelerator. "Don't we have a map of the place? If we can't hack their data, including

hidden passages from their facility, can't we just steal it from the construction company's computer?"

"It's not a normal building. I don't think that sort of data would still be at the company."

Tsuchimikado looked at the screen.

It showed several data points on the reformatory, but the map itself was designated secret. They wouldn't be able to touch it from here.

Accelerator, who was also peering at the screen, noticed something. "This place doesn't have a fire office." He looked over the data again. "There wouldn't be many fires in the facility, so they left it out to cut costs. But that means if there *was* a fire, the fire station would act. They would have gotten a rough map beforehand to be able to move cleanly through that maze."

Tsuchimikado directed his hacking attempt elsewhere.

He got results quickly.

"Here we go. Part of the secret area is blotted out, but if we assume there's a hidden staircase, then construction--wise, it has to be here. Beyond that is the underground block for traitors."

Judging from how there was only one predictable location for the hidden stairs, the traitors' block must not have been separated between male and female. They were all individual cells, with no common spaces at all.

"Technically, it is hidden," said Musujime. "From Block, too, who are attacking the place."

"Hah. Group and Block have equal authority. Anything we can get our hands on is free game for them, too, right? You're the one who said our secrecy levels in the data banks were the same, idiot."

Musujime glared at Accelerator, but he didn't budge.

"Tsuchimikado," he said instead, "what about security?"

"The guards are using MPS-79s—an old powered-suit model. Anti-esper equipment, but we can't expect much from them. They're only using self-defense tools to stop out-

of-control espers, but Block has real lethal weapons. The mercenaries left in District 11 had the whole nine yards of outside equipment—knives, guns, rifles, blasting powder, you name it—but they probably have Block's brand-new stuff now. From what Unabara said, they've still got almost a hundred mercs with them. We don't know how many people Block has, or their abilities. What's important is whether or not they have lethal abilities. Powered suits are really just big, rugged targets, after all."

"Not that," interrupted Accelerator casually. "That reformatory holds brutal espers, right? What about their-anti-abilities setup?"

"Mostly IDF jammers—around twenty-five."

"So, what? We can't use our abilities inside?"

"No, it just ruins your focus or purposely leaves thoughts easy for psychometer espers to track. Your abilities will be somewhat weaker, but it won't completely erase them. Those prison guards are apparently in one of the three professions most hated by insurance companies. It means they can't fully neutralize everything, even though the facility is so large in scale.

"But," warned Tsuchimikado, "using your abilities carelessly could make them go out of control. Especially ones that need complex calculations. It's too dangerous for you and Musujime. Be careful. That would be a stupid way to kill yourself."

8

When the ambulance stopped in front of the juvenile reformatory in School District 10, Accelerator, Motoharu Tsuchimikado, Mitsuki Unabara, and Awaki Musujime burst out of its back door.

From there, they couldn't spy the actual reformatory. Walls almost fifteen meters high were in the way. But even from where they stood, the sickening scent of smoke

reached their noses.

"…!!"

Musujime grated her teeth and immediately tried to dash in through the already destroyed gate, but Accelerator, leaning on his modern-design cane, frowned.

"Does this seem odd to anyone else?"

"You noticed, too?" said Tsuchimikado slowly, pulling a military pistol from his inside pocket. "No noise. If Block is in combat with the reformatory guards, we should be able to hear gunfire, at least."

The four passed through the gate, which also served as a checkpoint. Beyond it was a roundabout for police wagons. As they stepped toward the edge of the asphalt surface, twenty meters long per side, Accelerator felt a slight pain around his temples.

"…The IDF jammers, eh?"

He looked up and saw a net of thin wires drawn over the entire grounds, from one fifteen-meter-high wall to another. Were they emitting special EM waves or something?

They were probably causing espers to interfere with their own abilities by throwing their involuntary diffusion fields into chaos. He'd never heard of Anti-Skill using them, so they likely needed immense electricity or processing instruments, making them usable only in limited spaces like this one.

Doesn't look like I'm having a problem walking, at least…But I should probably stay away from ability usage mode, since it uses proxy calculations.

Still, Accelerator wasn't under the impression he couldn't use his ability here. They seemed to be stimulating abilities to run out of control instead, so he couldn't use it carelessly. His arms and legs could fly off if he got caught in his own ability.

They're using a bunch of other machines, too. Purposely getting them to interfere with one another.

If he could figure out what sort of devices they were

manipulating, he might have been able to find a countermeasure, but there, Accelerator stopped thinking. He'd found the reason the whole reformatory seemed odd.

Corpses.

Probably the mercenaries Block had called in from outside. Close to fifty big men were lying in pools of their own blood. Some were shot through the temple, others were missing parts of their heads from close-range shotgun blasts, and yet others had their necks cut with knives… There were many causes for death, but all had one thing in common.

"They…All of them were ended by their own weapons…," muttered Tsuchimikado.

"Suicide…? No, wait, this is—"

Unabara didn't get to finish.

"I've found you."

They heard a voice behind them.

Accelerator turned around to see a girl standing in the destroyed gate. A small girl, wearing a red sailor-style suit that looked like a school uniform. But there was a glint in her eyes. She wasn't just any killer.

"If you're here, does that make you one of Block's shitheads?"

"No, I'm with Member. I was only using them, though, so I don't care who I belong to," she answered coolly. She was probably the one who'd attacked the mercenaries lying around. That would mean she took down fifty without a single wound, but she didn't brag about it. She really didn't seem to have any interest in either the mercenaries or Block.

Another from Member…

Accelerator had run into someone from Member a short while ago in District 23, too. They didn't seem to be on friendly terms with Block. He didn't quite know what their

goals were, or which organizations they were hostile toward. Whatever the case, though, if they were hostile, their response wouldn't change.

But one person overreacted to seeing her face.

"…Wait, could you be…"

Mitsuki Unabara—an agent, whose name and face were known to none.

"You would ask me my identity at this point, Etzali?"

The girl looked at Mitsuki Unabara and called him a completely different name.

Or perhaps that was his true name.

As Unabara stood frozen in surprise, the girl wiped her face with a hand. Her face was no longer there. Her Asian features disappeared, leaving a girl with a dark complexion and sculpted features.

"I'll have to thank Block. Esper powers are reduced here. I don't have to worry as much about your allies or whatever getting in my way."

After seeing her face and hearing her voice, Unabara's face twisted.

"Xóchitl? What are you doing out here? You don't have a spell like this, and even in the organization, nobody would ever give you the dirty jobs!!"

"I have only one reason," stated the brown-skinned girl named Xóchitl, face steady. "You turned coats to Academy City, you traitor. I abandoned everything to come here and destroy you."

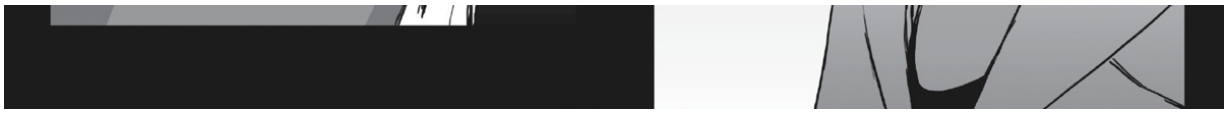
"So that's it," muttered Tsuchimikado, looking over at Unabara.

"…I'll hold her here. You all go on ahead," Unabara stated quietly, his voice strained. "She's Xóchitl. An Aztecan sorcerer who belonged to the same organization as I did before I came here."

The girl called Xóchitl didn't change her expression even after hearing Unabara's words. "I only have business with Etzali. I don't care if the rest of you leave, but will *they* let

you go?”





A gunshot rang out.

Accelerator and Tsuchimikado ducked behind a patrol wagon parked in the roundabout. Meanwhile, they heard several feet running out of the reformatory building.

“The Block mercs who were waiting…Don’t you have to deal with them?” said Tsuchimikado to Xóchitl. She ignored him. She really had only eliminated the ones in her way; she wasn’t interested in Block or their mercenaries.

But as the mercenaries stopped them there, Block was getting deeper and deeper into the reformatory—to use Awaki Musujime’s allies as hostages.

Accelerator tsked in frustration. “Bullshit. Get going already.”

“But…,” began Musujime.

“I can’t walk without a cane. If we can’t use abilities, then I can’t expect anything from your Move Point, either. The slowest guy gets to hold them off,” said Accelerator quickly. “Tsuchimikado, you’re Musujime’s backup. We don’t know how many guys Block has. Go into it ready to fight a lot of them.”

As for Unabara, he didn’t need to give him any directions at this point.

Accelerator would intercept the mercenaries coming out of the building, Unabara would settle the score with Member’s Xóchitl, and Tsuchimikado and Musujime would rescue the kids in the special block.

With each of their own goals in mind, the four members of Group glanced at one another and nodded.

“Let’s go!!”

They all got started.

9

Tsuchimikado and Musujime went down the hidden staircase the map’s contradictions had shown them and headed to the special insurgent block which, on paper,

didn’t exist.

They came across a few men on the way who appeared to be mercenaries, but Tsuchimikado used his gun to silence them. Xóchitl must have gotten a lot of them. Thanks to Accelerator taking on her job, they seemed to have mostly run out.

Then Musujime felt a cold, slight pain in her head.

“…IDF jammers. They’re getting stronger.”

“They’ve got machines outside, in the building, and in the rooms. Their effects are probably overlapping. This is the only juvenile reformatory in Academy City, and the only-anti-esper holding facility in the world. You can’t have normal security in a place like this.”

Tsuchimikado was probably feeling a similar pain.

She felt less like it was holding back her ability, restraining it, and more like it was throwing her aim off. If she used her ability without thinking, she could catch herself in it.

“Musujime. Your ability is extremely strong, but one misfire and you’ll die. You shouldn’t use it here.”

“You make it sound like my ability is the only thing I’m good for.”

“Shh!” Tsuchimikado held up his index finger to quiet her.

The passage stuck out the side of the stairwell, and from around the corner he heard a heavy clattering, like someone forcing open a bolted metal wall by driving a nail into the gaps between plates. Tsuchimikado silently brought his pistol back up. The completely ability-reliant Musujime must not have had her normal throwing weapons with her, because she removed the flashlight-slash-nightstick from her waist.

They burst out into the passage.

It was narrow. Metal doors for solitary confinement cells lined the walls on either side, and a big, bearlike man had stuck some kind of clay on one. Next to him, a sinewy

woman watched.

When they saw Tsuchimikado and Musujime, the bearlike man said, “Good timing…You must be Group.”

Musujime didn’t immediately move, probably due to the IDF jammers. Tsuchimikado, on the other hand, aimed his barrel right between the big man’s eyes. But before he could fire, the man stuck a long, needlelike object into the clay on the door.

“A plastic bomb, and this is the fuse.”

The muscly woman’s eyes sharpened. “Saku!!”

“We have to, Teshio. We have to use hostages here.”

The large man called Saku slowly removed his hand from the bomb with the fuse stuck in it. His hand held a wireless-device—the switch to set off the bomb.

“…If you use that now, it’ll blow you two to smithereens first.”

“I’ve already set the amount of gunpowder and direction. The blast will only go into the door.” Saku pointed to the bomb on the door with his index finger. “But the shockwave will rip through the cell. Along with the blown-apart fragments of this metal door. Breaking the door is easy, but caring about those inside isn’t. We have to be hasty, thanks to the lot of you getting in the way.”

“…!!” Suddenly, there was a boom of wind.

Musujime had bared her fangs, and her ability had accidentally discharged. Several fluorescent lights on the ceiling went out, sticking to the walls and floor in a muddle.

Even then, Saku and Teshio didn’t look disturbed.

“…Awaki Musujime. The famous Move Point,” said Saku with a grin, reaffirming his grip on the device to blow the bomb. “That’s good. Less work for us. We have the hostages and the other party all right here. Let’s get straight to negotiations, shall we? You be the guide to the Windowless Building.”

“And if I refuse?”

“You can’t refuse. Would you rather your ability go

berserk?”

That made Musujime clam up. If not for the anti-esper setup, she’d have skewered Saku a long time ago.

“Still…Group, eh? What did you learn after experiencing the 09/30 incident?”

“What?”

“We learned something. We thought Aleister governed every last corner of this insane world, but he doesn’t. There are ways to escape his sway, places to flee his control. Isn’t that a fun little fact? Academy City restricting us almost seems absurd now. And with the disturbance in Avignon after the 09/30 incident, we have the chance of a lifetime. You can’t tell us to stay put.”

“A new world built on the backs of others? That isn’t something you can speak of so haughtily. All it makes me think of are the massacres during the Age of Discovery.”

“Really? It’s human nature to desire a heaven or a paradise that isn’t here for them right now.”

As he listened to their exchange, Tsuchimikado watched the device Saku held.

He was good enough to shoot it down. But he couldn’t deny the possibility that he’d fail, nor that falling to the floor would coincidentally hit the button and blow the door to bits. If that happened, it didn’t matter where in that small cell Musujime’s ally hid—the hail of metal shards would get to them.

Musujime’s jaw was clenched so tightly she could have broken all her teeth.

The burly woman, Teshio, saw that and spoke to Saku next to her. “…Using hostages won’t make this better.”

“What are you saying, Teshio? This is where it gets real. This hostage’s worth has gone through the roof.”

“That was only something we needed, before negotiating with Move Point, before we knew where she was. Musujime is in, our hands now. The hostage, has served his purpose. If you use that bomb, she’ll be even more stubborn.” Teshio

glared at the bomb on the door. “Come to think of it, I was against this from the start. I only agreed to the hostage plan, because it was absolutely necessary, to achieve our goals. Now that we know, that’s not true, we don’t have to keep them.”

“No, Teshio. We have thirty-eight hostages right in front of us! Don’t you get it?! They’re our assets. We have so much capital that we can treat a few recklessly and it won’t even itch!! …Did you spend too long on the Anti-Skill job? Did you start having feelings for these brats?!”

“…Saku.”

“Don’t get in my way!! I’m gonna fucking kill Aleister!! This is the first step. I can’t let it end here!! Like hell I’ll let you take up my precious time. If you hold me back, Teshio, I’ll kill you first!! If you don’t want that, then—”

Saku couldn’t finish his sentence.

Ga-thud!!

Teshio crashed her fist into Saku’s body with all her might.

They could discern the incredible force behind the punch just from hearing it. The man from Block probably had no idea what had just happened to his body. Suddenly, he’d slammed into the wall and slid down to the floor in a heap. That was the first time Awaki Musujime saw the spittle actually come out of someone’s mouth. That’s how merciless the strike had been.

“…Don’t waste time, on nonsense.”

The woman known as Teshio reached for the metal door. She pulled the fuse out of the plastic bomb stuck to it, removed the bomb itself, and casually tossed them to the floor.

“Is this, better?” she said slowly.

Her face grim, Musujime asked quietly, “…What’s your game?”

“I apologize, for our rudeness. Feel free, to beat me, until you’re satisfied.” Teshio’s eyes held steady, even after Tsuchimikado pointed his gun at her. “But I will not yield to you, until you win. I, too, have a reason, I need to kill Aleister. I won’t, use hostages. I *will*, however, inflict pain on you, and get the information I need.”

10

Mitsuki Unabara and Xóchitl stood in the reformatory gymnasium.

The brown-skinned girl took a feather out of her pocket and held it to the side of her ear, saying, “Is looking at me with a false face your version of courtesy, Etzali?”

“…Unfortunately, I happen to rather like this face. You, on the other hand, have no right to use that face after leaving the organization.”

“You’re wrong,” cut in Xóchitl quietly. “You don’t even have the right to *live* anymore.”

“!!” Feeling a peculiar bloodlust, Unabara immediately drew the obsidian knife from his inside pocket. He hadn’t been planning on using the Spear of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli on his former ally.

“What have you been looking at this whole time?” asked Xóchitl, exasperated.

A moment later, everything from Unabara’s right wrist to his elbow stopped moving. Before he could grunt in surprise, the obsidian knife he gripped *began to move toward his face without his command*.

“Wh…what?!”

He wasted no time in grabbing his wrist with his other hand.

Little by little, the knife’s tip inched closer to his eyeball. It was his dominant hand, which might have been why he couldn’t keep it farther away.

Xóchitl’s face remained steady.

Not even joy for her advantageous position marked her expression. It felt like she was watching a boring play.

Argh…! At…this rate…!!

“*Raaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh*!!” shouted Unabara.

He forced his left hand to move and dislocate his right wrist joint. The pain of scraping bones tore through him before all feeling left his hand. Without any gripping force, the knife finally slid out and fell to the ground.

Holding his wrist, he took a big jump back.

Xóchitl pointed at the ground and said impassively, “You dropped something. Gonna pick it up?”

Her spell probably interfered with the weapons others held. It captured the weapon, then borrowed its force to cause the enemy to kill himself without her needing to get her hands dirty. To avoid that attack, he’d have to abandon all weapons and Soul Arms and fight either barehanded or with spells he could cast with only his body. Meanwhile, Xóchitl could use whatever weapon she wanted for her strikes.

It rejected human civilization itself, this overwhelming handicap.

However, thought Unabara.

The Xóchitl he remembered didn’t use spells like this. Though her nickname was ghastly—the Corpse Artisan—-her actual job was to extract information leftover in corpses, determining whether their last words were true or consolidating burial methods. She was just an aftercare provider for the dead.

She’d studied all the world’s necromancy, but purely for a peaceful purpose. The brown-skinned girl named Xóchitl shouldn’t have been accustomed to hurting others.

“…What happened? Or, rather, what on Earth is happening in the organization right now?!” demanded Unabara in spite of himself.

Xóchitl didn’t even answer. She swung her hand and produced a giant sword that, no matter how he looked at it,

couldn’t fit in her hand. Unlike Unabara’s blade, this was a traditional sword made of white chalcedony. It was technically a double-sided blade, but sharp grooves had been carved into the left and right like the back of a survival knife.

A macuahuitl…?!

It was a sword used by Aztecan warriors. In Aztecan civilization, which didn’t use metal in weapons, several small stone razors would be lined up on the sides of wooden blades, so instead of cutting by striking like katanas, it would cut by pulling across something, like a saw.

“I’ll hear what you have to say later. If you’re lucky, and the brain damage is minor.”

Xóchitl raised her *macuahuitl* and sprang into motion, dashing toward him.

Given that he had to fight barehanded, Unabara was at a severe disadvantage.

“Damn it!!”

But he couldn’t lose here.

He stepped back to create distance. When Xóchitl, her timing thrown off, tried to step in more deeply, Unabara dug his shoe into the dirt and flung it in front of him. Blinded, Xóchitl stopped moving. He tried to aim a second kick at her gut.

But with a *vwoosh*, Xóchitl’s *macuahuitl* swept to the side.

Unabara hastily pulled his foot back, but it left a mark on his leather shoe like a razor had cut it.

“That’s a traitor for you. Makeshift ploys suit you well.”

Xóchitl’s voice was calm. Even that struck Unabara as strange. Before, she would have hesitated to even pick up a weapon made for killing. Her job was to read the residual information from corpses, so she knew the terror of weapons like that far more than normal people did.

And yet…

“But no matter how much you struggle, you need to fight

barehanded. I'll give you the right to defend yourself, at least, but each time you do, it'll tear up your body a little bit more."

"…Weapons like that don't suit you."

"Then is this the real you? You, who abandoned the organization, went into hiding, and grew fat on the tranquility of Academy City?"

"Xóchitl…"

"If the answer is yes, then you are indeed a traitor. If not, then you're lying to yourself—and a liar has no place to criticize me. Either option means you have to die here!!"

Gripping her Aztecan sword, the *macuahuitl*, Xóchitl charged straight into range. He could sense no mercy—not in her eyes, her face, her hands, or her movements.

She was serious about killing him.

Maybe he could avoid one or two attacks. But he couldn't keep that up forever. And if she successfully landed even one clean hit, the grievous blood loss would end his life. He couldn't retreat for now, either. He needed more leeway for that. He could only choose that option once he decided she wouldn't kill him if he turned his back.

Still, so long as her weapon-breaking spell was in effect, he also couldn't use any tools to defend himself. If he tried, he'd end up attacking himself with it.

He was against the wall.

"Damn it!!" he swore, trying to back up.

A swing from the *macuahuitl* tore through his jacket, sending several cuttings of hair flying.

"It's over."

Thump!! Xóchitl stomped on the ground. Then, this time in range for a sure kill, she brought her *macuahuitl* up—a strike with timing Unabara would never be able to dodge.

She had no emotional connection from Unabara being a former ally, someone from the same organization, or anything.

Roar!! She cleaved down the sword.

…?! Unabara thrust his right arm, its wrist dislocated, over his head. She saw it and laughed. She must not have thought it would provide any defense. The *macuahuitl*, with its sawlike blades, descended with all her body weight behind it at a terrible speed.

Shrripp!! It tore apart his jacket, and then the jagged blade dug into the flesh of his arm. The grating, sawing noise reached his bones. His face distorted in pain.

But…

…that was all.

Mitsuki Unabara's arm was still attached.

In fact, with the *macuahuitl* buried in his arm, he rallied all his strength and tried to push it away.

"What…?!" exclaimed Xóchitl in surprise before he slammed her in the side with a kick. Her petite frame gave way to momentum and crashed to the ground.

"…The Aztecs had no way of processing metal into weapons, so their swords aren't that sharp. Instead of having a single chunk of iron for a blade, it uses many small, jagged stones along the sides of a wooden club. Even an expert couldn't cleave bone; it's made so you have to sweep the whole thing across arteries. In short, I can stop your sword with my bones."

With the Aztecan sword still lodged in his right arm, he coughed, then continued, "Why did you think I gave up on dodging and got my arm ready? If I thought it would get through my arm and cut me in half, I wouldn't have tried to defend like that. I decided that if I kept on evading, I'd lose due to blood loss."

His tactic was possible because of Xóchitl's relatively small stature and lack of skill with the weapon. A true warrior would still have broken his arm even if she couldn't cut the bone.

"That's why I said that weapon doesn't suit you."

Unabara looked down at the immobilized, laboriously breathing Xóchitl.

He still couldn’t use weapons. But she had let go of her *macuahuitl*, too. In this state, he could win by strangling her, or hitting her hard enough. Given the differences in their physiques, it would be easy to straddle her to stop her from moving before she got her hands on another weapon.

Xóchitl…

But he couldn’t do that.

No matter how much he wanted to.

“I will not take your life. Disappear, and don’t come back,” he said bitterly, popping his wrist joint back into place and swinging his right hand to send the sword to the ground.

When Xóchitl heard that, a subtle smile came to her lips.

And a moment later, the brown-skinned girl’s body began to crumble.

11

The underground passage was straight and narrow.

And inside the facility, the myriad of anti-esper measures employed—IDF jammers first and foremost—made Musujime’s ability unreliable. If anything went wrong, things could get really bad, even to the point of killing everyone instantly.

That was why Tsuchimikado didn’t rely on her, nor did he attempt to approach Teshio when he didn’t know what sort of attacks she would use. Instead, he just brought up his gun, intending to fire bullets in a spread pattern that would leave her no room for escape.

In response, Teshio kicked something at her feet into the air.

It was a cloth bag with ammunition that Saku, now lying on the ground, had been holding. If he accidentally hit that, it would send a spray of bullets out into the narrow passage, ricocheting off the walls and quite possibly him. By

the time he was startled into stopping his trigger finger, Teshio had begun running up the passage, her fist clenched tight.

"!!"

Tsuchimikado squeezed the trigger, just barely before her fist was in range.

But Teshio assumed a boxer-like stance, low enough to kiss his knees, in order to let the bullet go past.

Before Tsuchimikado could fix his aim, Teshio sprang out of her low stance and tackled him right in the stomach. The blow was strong enough to destroy doors, and even thin walls, and it sent his body flying several meters back.

A terrible sound rang out, and he almost stopped breathing. "Those movements…Anti-Skill arrest techniques…?"

"This is, my spin on it. If I used, something like this, on a child, it would kill them."

Tsuchimikado fired his gun even as they spoke, but Teshio easily avoided it by swinging her upper body out of the way. The moment he was out of bullets, she sent out a kick that tore the gun from his hand.

Then she came in for another tackle.

With a dull *thud*, Teshio trapped Tsuchimikado between her shoulder and the wall. When she quietly stepped away, he slumped to the floor, limp.

"!!" That was when Awaki Musujime swung her flashlight down behind Teshio.

By simply raising her hand, Teshio caught the blunt weapon. "A professional needs, no eccentric abilities, nor any one-shot skills."

Returning the favor, she used her other hand to backhand Musujime across the face.

Thwop!! The blow sent her careening to the side, and she collided with one of the solitary confinement cell doors along the wall.

"We only need, an array of basic tactics, to defeat our

enemies, in a logical manner."

Teshio delivered a kick.

With a terrible *ga-bam,* Musujime tumbled into the cell along with the door, which should have been sturdily made. The extreme impact made her think her internal organs had been wrecked. Despite feeling a strange urge to vomit, nothing came out—it was like her throat was plugged shut.

One of her allies must have been in this cell as well, because she heard them immediately call out her name. That alone gave her completely worn body a little bit of energy.

Ka-click. Teshio set her foot down in the broken cell entrance, blocking her path.

Musujime put a hand on the wall and wobbled to her feet, bringing her flashlight up. After telling her nearby ally to back up, she said, "…You were talking about forcing me to spit out the route they use to send goods into the nuke--proof Windowless Building, then trying to destroy it from within with multi-synchronous bombs, right?"

"Feel like, talking now?"

"You can't possibly believe you can take down Aleister like that. If that was all it took, anyone with a teleportation ability could kill him in his sleep. You really don't think Aleister has a plan for that?"

"You're right—perhaps I cannot, kill Aleister. He is, in the truest sense, a monster.

"However," she said, "the life support machines, keeping him alive, are different."

"…"

"Those are just, machines. The reason, a monster like Aleister, would be holed up, in a fortress sturdier than a nuclear shelter, is plain to see. I've heard, those machines, have no replacement. If they're blown up, he would be in trouble."

"No, he wouldn't," retorted Musujime, trying to catch what breath she could. "It's not a *windowless building* in

the first place. If you don’t even understand that, then you don’t have any useful information. Plan all you want, but nothing will work.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you realize it? A building without any doors or windows would never normally exist. But there are a bunch of hints connecting to the right answer. For example, being able to produce everything he needs to live, including oxygen, inside. The fact that it can withstand a nuclear attack also means it blocks radiation. All sorts of cosmic rays from the stars.”

“Cosmic rays? …Could that mean—?”

“No,” interrupted Musujime.

“It’s not like that.”

Feeling her own powerlessness, she smiled thinly. Her answer sure seemed to have caught Teshio off-guard. “With these many hints, there’s a few possibilities. I have a couple theories of my own. But answers about Aleister himself aren’t part of them. My theories at this point in time are nothing more than guesses based on the information I’ve been shown up to the here and now. And I’m pretty sure Aleister hasn’t shown me all the information.”

“…”

“The only thing I can say is that his plan is far beyond what we can imagine. For Aleister, this entire planet is probably just a disposable tool. And you think your banal methods could possibly defeat him?”

Musujime had only been trying to buy a little time. She just wanted to let out some of the damage she’d accumulated.

But Teshio said, “That’s a great story, but my intentions, will not change.”

“…Why are you so intent on taking Aleister’s head?”

“I, too, have seen, my fair share of tragedy, in this city.

And I wanted to ask Aleister, whether he was involved, or if he knew nothing at all. That's it."

Teshio's tone was curt. It wasn't a desire for revenge burning in her heart. Because of that, though, Musujime felt the truth behind her words. No unnecessary emotions were driving her actions.

"That's a corny request."

"Maybe so."

"I was possessed by this 'need for truth' thing once, too. But going after something like that won't get your peace of mind back." Musujime's voice was quiet. "If Aleister admitted he caused those tragedies, would you accept that? If he said he wasn't involved, would you accept that? Whichever answer you get, you'll probably think he's lying. That there was something more to it. The question wouldn't mean anything, and so there's no point in asking it."

"…I see."

Teshio said no more. She'd probably decided on her answer by now—so she didn't waver one bit.

"Then what are you, going to do?"

Musujime couldn't answer that.

Even inside this reformatory that held criminal espers, they were in a top-secret area. The anti-esper measures, including the IDF jammers, were probably firmly optimized for those specific people. Still, she couldn't attack with her special ability, Move Point.

And without that, Awaki Musujime was just a girl. She didn't have firing skills like Accelerator, and she wasn't proficient in close-quarter combat like Tsuchimikado.

After thinking it through, she smiled a little and said:

"…If I keep thinking like that, I'll never be able to protect anyone."

As her lips moved, her hand went around to her back. She grabbed the bundle of cords there and yanked.

A low-frequency oscillation treatment device. They were electrodes, aids that measured the disorder in her brain

waves and gave her mild shocks to induce stress-relieving effects, and she tore them all off at once. She tossed the flashlight to the side, too.

Musujime, having lost everything, still didn't stop smiling.

When Block's Teshio saw that, she looked at her with interest. "You're going to use it."

"Yes," answered Musujime clearly, without a moment's pause.

"Sorry, but I'm going all out."

Suddenly, a metal nail appeared in Musujime's empty hand. It was probably from the sturdy bolt on the solitary confinement cell door. But her Move Point wasn't precise enough. She felt it tearing up the skin of her clenched palm.

The trauma haunting the depths of her heart came on all at once.

She forced it down, then triggered Move Point again.

This time, her very body disappeared.

Using logical eleven-dimensional vectors, she overcame her three-dimensional limitations and snuck right up to the brawny woman. A crushing pressure assailed her stomach as she teleported, but she ignored it and tried to jam the nail into Teshio's gut.

In response, Teshio backed up.

Musujime's instincts told her that if she got away now, she wouldn't be able to win. But when she tried to step forward, she realized her right leg wasn't moving. It felt like it was stuck to the ground with superglue, but her memory had very clearly felt this sensation before.

The root of this terrible feeling was that, as a result of mistaking her teleport positioning, everything from halfway down her calf and below was buried inside the floor.

Suffering.

Terror.

Shock.

All those emotions she's experienced before came surging up from her stomach at once, but…

I'll overcome this…

With a *creak*, she squeezed the iron nail tight and bit her lips to hold everything in. Behind her was an ally she needed to protect. There was a life she needed to protect right now, and for that, Awaki Musujime crushed the past creeping out of her.

I'll overcome this infuriating scar, damn it!!

She gritted her teeth, then moved her leg in one motion as if to yank it out of mud.

In that moment, she heard a ripping noise.

Awaki Musujime didn't look away from any of it.

And she went forward.

Right up to the Block killer threatening her ally's life she went, ignoring her mutilated foot, simply gripping that iron nail, shooting forward like a bullet.

Thud!

An explosively dull noise rattled the cell.

The power drained from Teshio's body. As she tottered forward as if to lean on Musujime, she brought her lips to Musujime's ear and muttered into it.

"…Awfully confident, of you."

The iron nail was in Musujime's hand. But right before impact, she'd spun it around in her hand and struck Teshio not with the sharp end, but with the middle of its flat back end.

"Unfortunately," she answered indifferently, "this is the leadership they need from me."

12

Mitsuki Unabara couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

He’d beaten Xóchitl in the reformatory gym. Now, her right arm had suddenly crumbled. It wasn’t biological decomposition.

It was like an invisible person taking off bandages.

The texture of the outside of her skin was incredibly human, but after the bandages came off, there was only a void. The change, which started from her fingertips, ate its way up to her elbows in the blink of an eye.

“Xóchitl…? What on Earth…?!”

“My body’s hit its limit, that’s all,” said the brown-haired girl with a thin smile as she slowly came undone from the tips of her hands and feet. “Hope you learned something. When you try to compensate for a lack of ability with a grimoire, this is the result you get.”

“Wait…*You read a grimoire?*”

“Even more than that, actually. As an Aztecan sorcerer yourself, you’d know. In our rituals, we reach heaven by eating the flesh of man. Basically, a magical conduit connects me to any flesh cut from my body.”

Hearing those few words, Unabara was shocked. Now he knew the *real* meaning behind the spell, which used someone else’s weapon to make them kill themselves. She dried her own skin, made it into a powder, and scattered it around. Magically speaking, that powder was a part of Xóchitl’s body, so she could control them like limbs just by thinking at them. The same applied to things they stuck to tightly.

She made other people’s weapons part of her own body. That was the true identity of Xóchitl’s spell.

But…

“Any spell that gets rid of your own body like that is quick to fail! This is already past the point where Soul Arms could assist you! You must have at least known that much, Xóchitl!!”

“It doesn’t matter. The organization demanded disposal

of the traitor, and I answered. If I can kill you before my expiration date, the organization's goal will be achieved."

"Damn!! The organization I knew was already terrible, but it wasn't this bad! What the hell happened there while I was away?!" exclaimed Unabara.

Xóchitl only smiled mysteriously.

The brown-skinned girl was swiftly crumbling. By Unabara's estimation, there was only a third of her physical body left. Naturally, that wasn't enough to preserve her life. It was leaving her flesh and organs out in the open air.

…I don't think any ordinary spell or Soul Arm could have caused this bad of a situation.

Unabara watched the destruction, far past her limbs now and at her gut, and thought desperately:

If there's anything more esoteric than those…all I can think of is an original copy!!

Via a fusion with an original grimoire, which was indestructible by anyone and could act entirely on its own —or rather, by becoming one of its parts—Xóchitl had attained power. Things made sense when he thought of it that way. Causing people who were holding weapons to kill themselves with those weapons was very much in the vein of the defenses original copies had. And the Aztecs had books called *codices*, which wrote characters in animal skin.

Animal skin…Wait!!

Unabara stared dumbly at the girl's brown skin, which was literally coming apart at the seams.

And inside was written——

"Guh, *urgh*, *ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh*!!"

When he carelessly peered inside, he screamed.

Just a few characters. He hadn't even seen them—they'd only gotten into his peripheral vision, and it almost broke

his mind. It wasn’t a written, less-pure copy, a reinterpretation for the average person. It was a bona fide original.

He grasped at his pounding temples and staggered, but he continued to think.

Ugh…A derivation of the calendar stone?

The calendar stone was an Aztecan calendar arranged in a circle. However, the Aztec empire used two different calendars at the same time. They also believed in the sun’s death and rebirth, among other things, so the calendars became incredibly complex. On the underside of Xóchitl’s skin, there was only an extraction of the time portions relating to life and death, themselves developed into a religious discourse.

Unabara couldn’t handle something like this. The very idea of fighting against it was a mistake. Even the index of forbidden books was said to be incapable of destroying these evil writings—a mere sorcerer was helpless against one.

However,

even so,

I won’t…let you die…

Xóchitl was a noncombat personnel. How did she sneak all the way in? What was happening with the organization? He had a pile of questions to ask. He couldn’t let her die there.

Original grimoire copies were indestructible.

Even if they could be destroyed, Xóchitl’s life depended on this one, so she wouldn’t last.

With Mitsuki Unabara’s power alone, it was impossible to solve this problem.

Which meant…

If human power can’t realize it, then I just need to borrow this grimoire’s!!

Original copies defended all attacks, and nobody could damage them. But there was one exception: showing the

knowledge contained within one to someone who wanted it. If they truly prevented any interference whatsoever, nobody would be able to flip through their pages, and the very reason for a grimoire's existence would be lost. He didn't know how, but original copies could differentiate between readers and everyone else, and tended to cooperate with those broadening their knowledge.

Which was why Unabara thought this: *I'll inherit this grimoire.*

If he could obtain ownership of the grimoire, its automatic interception spells would cease to function. And by inheriting it, he could naturally tear the grimoire from Xóchitl's body, too. It wasn't cooperating with Xóchitl because it liked her personality or anything. It was just seeking those who would disseminate the knowledge within it.

On top of that…

I'll fool the grimoire's judgment. I can make it think that I can't inherit it if Xóchitl dies! Then it should save her life on its own!!

Mitsuki Unabara wasn't able to save Xóchitl. Because of that, he just had to make a stronger force act on her instead. There was no precedent, of course. If he couldn't completely deceive a phenomenal original copy, his reward would rebound in the form of death.

But Mitsuki Unabara didn't hesitate.

To save this brown-skinned girl, he would accept everything.

13

Dragging her bloodied foot, Awaki Musujime slowly exited the cell.

The other cells were locked. Her allies wouldn't be coming out. Even if they took more forceful measures, the higher powers in Academy City might still set to work

erasing them.

She may have gotten Block out of the way, but she hadn't resolved the fundamental problem. She hadn't overturned the situation—how their lives were in someone else's hands.

But Musujime heard somebody say "I always believed in you."

She heard her allies' voices through a small window installed in the cells' iron doors where food was passed through, like a mail slot. They said they believed in her. They said they knew they were right to believe in her. She could sense the relief in their voices. Relief that she'd saved their lives, of course—but also that Musujime had come running here for them.

For a short while, Awaki Musujime couldn't move a muscle.

Finally, she slowly opened her mouth. But no words would come out. Her lips were trembling harder than she thought. Even so, she began, little by little, to speak.

Over a long period of time, just two or three words eventually made it out.

But that was all they needed.

"Good now?" said Tsuchimikado.

Musujime pushed him out of the way with a hand and headed for the exit.

Accelerator and Mitsuki Unabara, too, were outside. They'd each been fighting their own battles—nobody was unharmed. But the four members of Group had still come together again.

Musujime didn't say anything.

Tsuchimikado looked at her and sighed.

"Then back to the dark we go."

INTERLUDE THREE

She walked slowly down the street.

Considering the position she was in, being there was unthinkable. Anyone had free passage through the streets —and she, without any bodyguards, simply blended in with the crowd. In her hand were five balloons filled with helium, which drew yearning stares from passing children.

She held a cell phone in her other hand.

"Hey, like, Item's the one I'm in charge of, you know. Seriously…I'm not getting any overtime pay for this call."

"What are you saying? I'll admit they got the better of me with Block. But I can recover anything I need to with my strength. Take down the quarantine on Block's position and info! If I can find them again, I can prevent damage to Academy City—"

"The damage thing is fine. It looks like the Group kids just disabled Block at the juvenile reformatory. They won't be causing you trouble anymore."

"O-oh." The person on the phone sounded relieved. *"In that case, I'll…"*

"Yes," she continued, also relieved.

"The Block threat is gone, so we don't need you controlling them anymore."

She heard the person on the other end gasp.

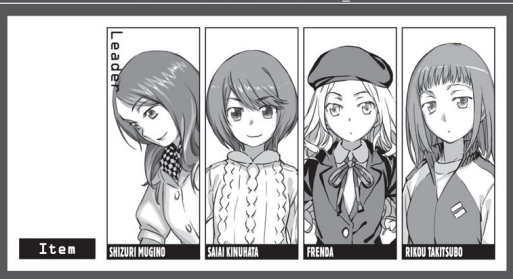
He panicked and began to argue vehemently about

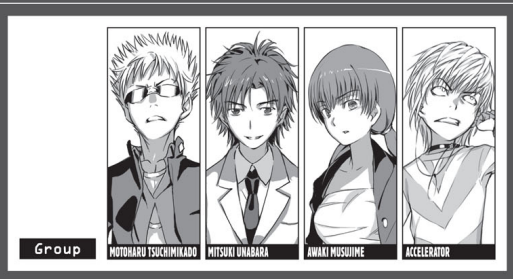
something, but she wasn’t listening anymore. This was something they’d all decided on. She hung up, then walked back into the crowds.

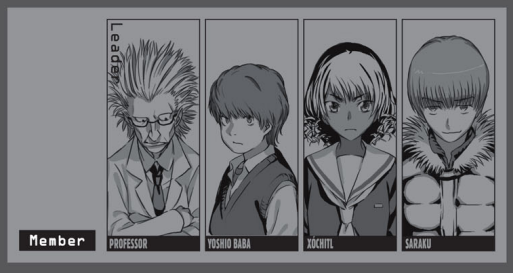
She let go of one of the balloons in her hand. It flew high into the sky.

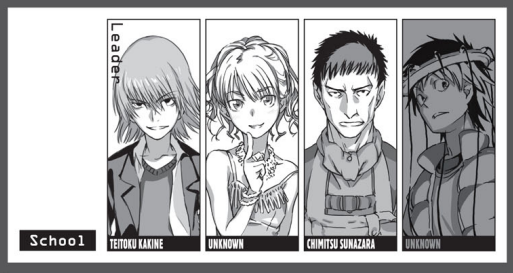
“Anyway,” she said, not watching it go, fingering the strings of the others. “I wonder what the person controlling School is named.”

Transmission data from "UNDER_LINE"











Transmission data from "UNDER_LINE"

CHAPTER 4

The Paper-Thin Line Between Self-Loathing and Pride Enemy Level5.

1

In the end, he washed the ashes down a river.

Shiage Hamazura just couldn't bring himself to throw them into an automatic raw garbage disposer. He knew it had only satisfied himself—and contaminated the-environment—but he still resisted discarding into the garbage what had once been human.

…This sucks, he thought idly. He'd split up with Takitsubo, and he was now walking along the river alone. *It's not like I sympathized with whoever was in the bag. I was just scared to think it could be me next. I wouldn't like it if someone threw me out like trash when I die.*

"Damn it…" Resisting the urge to mutter *and now I have to go back to them*, Hamazura started back on his way to where Item was waiting.

Then he heard a voice call out to him, saying, "Hey!"

He tried to ignore it and keep going, but someone grabbed his shoulder from behind.

The impact hit him before he turned.

Thud!! A blow to his head, and Hamazura fell to the dirt below.

He heard laughing. When he looked that way, he saw a few young men he'd never met. One was holding a golf club. That was probably what he'd hit Hamazura with.

…?! Are they burglars?

Eighty percent of Academy City's population was students. Depending on the time of day, there would be almost nobody in the student dorms. Some delinquents had formed armed groups, which would plunder the rooms while their owners were away.

"See, I told you. I've seen this guy before. Skill-Out, from District 7, yeah?"

"Didn't they go down?"

"Doesn't matter. We just have to beat him here."

They all laughed. Before Hamazura could speak, they began kicking him from all directions. And all they did was laugh.

"Get this, Skill-Out. We've had it real rough until just recently."

"That leader of yours—Komaba or something? That guy was fucking annoying. We couldn't do our jobs with him around."

"Anyway, we're gonna beat your face in so hard you'll look like an extra on a movie set. You hearin' us?"

Hamazura tried to say that wasn't his fault, but another kick dug into his side before he could. Now that he was having trouble breathing, he couldn't talk to begin with.

Damn…it…

The unknown person resting in the sleeping bag flashed across his mind. Burned by the electric furnace, turned into ash, and washed down the river—he couldn't get the sights out of his mind. Now he'd be erased like that soon. How cheap Level Zero lives went for. It was all making him angry.

And next to him on the dirt-covered road was a metal pipe for propane gas about the width of his thumb.

He didn't hesitate.

"!!" He grabbed the L-shaped pipe and fiercely swung.

It struck the golf club–wielding shit in the ankle, and he could feel the cracking of bones breaking in his hand. As

the screaming idiot fell, the bloody Hamazura rose, bringing down the pipe again and landing another blow.

The other two delinquents shouted something, but he ignored them.

Once again, he brought the pipe down on the guy, and was rewarded with a comforting scream.

When one of the other kids heard that, he took a hammer out of his bag.

That might kill me, thought Hamazura. An iron pipe was plenty destructive, but he couldn't knock someone out in one hit with it. If this came down to a straight brawl, they could easily both end up dead, too.

But at that point, he didn't feel like stopping. The sensation of the sleeping bag's synthetic fabric weighed on his palms with amazing vividness.

And then…

"Over here, Hamazura!!"

Right as he heard the shout, the hammer-gripping boy's neck bounced to the side with a *grrk!* Before Hamazura realized it, someone had thrown a brick-like object at him, and someone else grabbed his arm.

"Come on, idiot! We're getting out of here!!"

In a strange display of lethargy, Hamazura let the person pull him into a run.

After a few moments like that, he finally put a name to the voice. "You're…Hanzou, right?"

Hanzou used to be another member of Skill-Out, one he'd been on a few jobs with. If he was hanging around a place like this, maybe he was considering robbing an ATM again, thought Hamazura, remembering part of his old habits.

Exasperated, Hanzou answered, "Did you forget the-back-alley rules or what, stupid? If you're too obsessed with winning, you'll end up dead. If you want to concentrate on life or death, then give up on winning!"

He glanced behind him to make sure nobody was following, and then they stopped.

Hamazura gave Hanzou a mystified look. “Why did you help me? I’m the one who ruined Skill-Out and ran from punishment.”

“That’s not something you gotta say,” replied Hanzou in irritation. “I mean, don’t you get it by now? We don’t hate you, and we don’t think it’s your fault. With what happened, it didn’t matter who ended up as Skill-Out’s leader. We were ruined anyway.”

“…”

“Clinging to the past might look good on TV, but we’re not walking down that road. Although, I’ll admit those were some fun times…me making plans, you getting assistants, Komaba leading the attacks.”

“Yeah,” said Hamazura impassively. “I’ll admit it. It was a shitty life, but it was still fun.”

“…What are you gonna do now?”

“Hell if I know. It doesn’t matter where I roll into. It wouldn’t be the same if I went back to Skill-Out, though. I don’t think there’s much value in that,” he spat, about to turn his back to Hanzou.

But just then, Hanzou reached for something in his pocket and tossed it at him. “Take this. Doesn’t look like you have a good weapon.”

It was a small handgun, its grip only half the size of his palm.

“…This is a ladies’ gun.”

“Who cares? The harder a weapon is to use, the better. Get too used to one and you’ll spill more blood than you need to.”

Hamazura spun it lightly in his hand, then stowed it in his sleeve.

This time, without looking at Hanzou, he left the alley alone.

Item probably had his next job waiting.

2

Shiage Hamazura returned to one of Item's hideouts.

"Hey, Hamazura, you're late," Shizuri Mugino lobbed at him lazily.

They were in part of a high-rise building in School District 3. The facility consisted of sports gyms and pools; all the indoor leisure activities it could fit—and those who used them—were of fairly high grade. You needed to show your member card just to enter the building, and whenever you wanted to use one of its facilities, they'd look at your member rank. Apparently, a membership here was one of the first things people of the so-called upper crust would acquire for their status.

Hamazura and the others were in a VIP lounge, made to look like a European-style "salon"—a fancy suite of private rooms rented out on a yearly contract. You couldn't even use it temporarily without at least a two-star membership-rank—truly a top-notch room. Even though it was considered private, it was easily bigger than a four-room apartment, and Mugino had made herself at home on a sofa.

Hamazura looked at the people gathered there, then asked dubiously, "What happened to Frenda?"

"Vanished," answered Mugino curtly. "Either she died or got caught. We don't have time to replace her, so in any case, Item will have to settle for three for now. 'Course, School's missing one of theirs, too, so our numbers match. It won't be hard to recover. Item's got Takitsubo, after all."

Mugino had said *three*. Hamazura frowned at not being counted, but pointing it out wouldn't get him anywhere.

"Hamazura. You're hurt," said Takitsubo, looking at his face.

"It's nothing," he replied, blowing it off. "What do we do now? School stole the Tweezers, right?"

“Yup,” admitted Mugino easily. “So now it’s our turn to counterattack. Takitsubo’s Ability Stalker can search for a specific esper’s location with any involuntary diffusion field she remembers. And we fought them at the Particle Physics Institute already. That means we can chase them down. Item’s purpose is to protect against the higher-ups and-top-secret organizations running amok. Let’s do our duty, shall we?”

Hamazura looked at Takitsubo. As always, she had her arms and legs sprawled out lazily. Maybe she was always acting unstable because of the never-ending IDF effects.

“Should I search for Dark Matter?”

“Who’s that?” he asked.

“The number-two Level Five,” said Mugino. “And the asshole leading School.”

Meanwhile, Takitsubo brought out a small case from her pocket with white powder in it.

Kinuhata looked at the see-through case, mystified. “You’ve, like, got it super-rough. You can’t use your ability without Crystals, can you?”

“It’s no big deal. This was always normal for me,” said Takitsubo, licking just a little bit of the powder.

The glow returned to her eyes. She straightened up and paused, as though this was her regular state.

“Beginning involuntary diffusion field-based search. Stopping pickup of approximate and resemblant IDFs. Limiting search results to a single matching IDF. Time to completion: five seconds.”

Her voice came out like a machine.

And then came the right answer.

“Result: Dark Matter is in this building.”

Before everyone could give a start and shout “What?!” it happened:

The door to the private lounge was decisively kicked in.

A man came walking in from behind it.

Shizuri Mugino saw him and growled. “Dark Matter…!!”

“I’d rather you call me by name. It’s Teitoku Kakine, in case you didn’t know.”

The man’s hands had peculiar “nails” made of machines. “The Tweezers…,” said Mugino.

“Sweet, right? Came to declare victory.”

“Hah. What’s some secondary candidate Aleister didn’t choose getting all excited for? You ran away before. Now it looks like you had an attitude change.”

“Nah, look. That was some good shit at the Particle Physics Institute. Thanks to you, we lost one of our only four official School members.”

“Aren’t you forgetting someone? We killed your sniper a few days ago. You get a new one?”

The conversation between Level Fives was suddenly interrupted.

The cause was Saiai Kinuhata. Without rising from the sofa, she had lifted up a nearby table with one hand. The table was covered excessively in decorations and looked like it weighed at least two dozen pounds—and now this girl, who looked no older than twelve, hurled it at Teitoku Kakine.

Ga-slam!!

The table shattered, but Teitoku kept a straight face.

“That hurt,” he said, so naturally nobody could tell if he meant it. “And it made me mad. I’ll smash you to pieces first.”

Kinuhata still didn’t respond. She ran to the side of the room, and with her tiny fist, mercilessly broke through the lounge wall. Then she grabbed Hamazura’s and Takitsubo’s hands, shot a quick glance at Mugino, and dove into the broken wall.

A luxurious lounge of similar construction was on the other side. People were inside, but Kinuhata punched them unconscious. When they got into the hallway, there was a

man there who was probably one of School's subordinates, but she knocked him out, too.

Saiai Kinuhata wasn't monstrously strong; she was an esper who could freely control the nitrogen in the air. The skill was incredibly powerful, and by manipulating chunks of compressed nitrogen, she could lift cars and even stop bullets—but its scope was very small and only reached a few centimeters out from her palms. That was why it had looked like she'd been lifting up the table.

"Hamazura, find us a car, like, super-quick, please," said Kinuhata. "Takitsubo is probably one of School's targets. Now that they found this hideout, it'd be extra safe to assume they found other info, too. They probably discovered Takitsubo's troublesome ability and came to crush us all to throw off pursuit."

"You mean her search ability?" asked Hamazura. In terms of visible power, Mugino and Kinuhata seemed a lot flashier, but…

"They don't have to kill everyone in Item—they can severely limit our operations just by taking out Takitsubo. Her being here or not decides who's being chased and who's doing the chasing. If it was me, I'd go for her first."

"…"

"But as long as Takitsubo is safe, we can recover the situation. So please get her in a car and get really far away. If you avoid Item's hideouts, you should be able to buy a lot of time." Kinuhata took a stun gun out of her pocket and made Takitsubo hold it. "You always seem super-unsteady, so this weapon is good for you. Even if it misfires, you won't die."

Bang!! An explosion ripped through a nearby room.

It was from the lounge where Mugino and Kakine were.

"Get going, like, crazy fast, please!" said Kinuhata, turning her back to them.

Before he could say anything, the small girl had already run off toward the battlefield.

3

The explosion’s impact made the entire building shake helplessly.

As the chief guests ran about, trying to escape the indoor leisure facilities, Saiai Kinuhata walked through the lobby.

Men from School’s ancillary organization were lying on the floor. Kinuhata had thrashed them. She walked next to them, kicking away nearby guns and rifles.

Then suddenly, her face jolted to the side.

By the time she realized she’d been shot, a second and third impact flashed through her, and her small body was sent flying to the floor. She let herself land, then slid across and hid herself behind a nearby pillar.

…A sniper. Where?

The impacts had struck her in the head, chest, and lower gut—all vital spots. If not for the shield from her ability, she’d have died for certain. She placed her palm on a crushed bullet on the floor.

Steel rounds…The magnetic sniper rifle from before? If its initial speed is subsonic, then judging by the way this thing is crushed, they’re five to seven hundred away.

As she thought, she reached into an inside pocket. Her fingers came out with pieces of metal between them, about the size of juice cans, with thirty-centimeter metal rods on the ends. They looked kind of like maracas, or maybe old-fashioned grenades, but it was neither.

They were portable anti-tank missile tips.

The fleeing patrons looked at her in shock, but she ignored them.

She would aim the tips between her fingers in that direction, then pull the short strings attached to their back with her other hand. It would look like setting off crackers

at a party or drawing back the string of a bow. After a breath, she jumped out from behind the pillar and looked straight out the broken window. A bullet hit between her eyes that very moment, but she ignored it and took aim.

Then, without hesitating, she pulled the strings.

With a dull *shhhp* noise, the power of compressed air sent the missile tips flying from their grips. After traveling about ten meters forward, they ignited—and, scattering flames behind them, closed the five-hundred-meter distance in the blink of an eye.

When all the missiles crashed into the side of the building, the building blew up like crushed mille-feuille. Perhaps as a gift of its excellent aseismic construction, it managed to at least avoid coming down entirely.

“Whoa, that’s crazy. I bet Sunazara and his magnetic sniper rifle are a goopy mess now, eh? Maybe that’s all someone we got in a hurry could manage.”

A bright voice came to her.

When Kinuhata turned around, Teitoku “Dark Matter” Kakine was just coming out of the hallway.

“Heh, wreckage from Project Dark May? You must have it tough. That was the one where they took Accelerator’s calculation patterns and used them to optimize a bunch of espers’ personal realities, right?”

“…”

“And you ended up with a self-defense ability. Though originally, it was an air control–type ability. Automatically deploying a defensive field made from your ability around you, same as Accelerator, is all you can do, eh? Haven’t you ever felt sorry for yourself?”

“Not really,” answered Kinuhata shortly. “I’m super–well off compared to the PRODUCE test subjects. They got their brains sliced up like birthday cakes so people could figure out where personal realities come from.”

“Right,” said Kakine, sounding uninterested.

Still on her guard against the man before her, she asked,

“What happened to Mugino?”

“Right, well. Nothing much.”

His words were blunt. Just from that, Kinuhata knew: As a Level Four, she couldn’t stand up to someone who treated the fourth-most-powerful Level Five in Academy City like that. She’d gotten a vague impression to that end when they’d fought in the Particle Physics Institute, and now she knew she was right.

“So where’s the Ability Stalker? That’s all I want to know. Tell me where she is and I’ll let you go.”

“Who would be stupid enough to make a deal like that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Frenda, for example.”

“…”

“I’m just saying you’ve got the choice. And to make things clear, your Level Four Nitrogen Armor can’t beat my Dark Matter. No fancy tricks are gonna close that gap, either.”

Kinuhata said nothing.

As she glared silently at him, Kakine said, “Where is the Ability Stalker?”

“It doesn’t seem like I have the right to refuse…,” said Kinuhata, smiling a little.

As she spoke, she grabbed a nearby bench and hurled it.

But…

With a roar, a strange explosion burst out from Kakine.

It shattered the bench flying at him and even batted Kinuhata’s body to the side.

Her small frame flew ten meters through the air, then crashed through a thin wall and into another room.

Kakine watched and smiled thinly. “Weighed your pride against death, eh? Emotional, but certainly not practical.”

Then he turned to a nearby subordinate and said, “Retrieve her.”

“Retrieve…You mean she’s still alive after that?”

“That’s the sort of esper she is.”

4

Shiage Hamazura and Rikou Takitsubo made it to the elevator lobby.

He hit the button on the wall, and the display—paused on floor 48—quickly began to descend to the twenty-fifth floor, where they were. Meanwhile, Hamazura took out a lock-picking tool…*Parking garage must be underground. Everyone here’s probably got a fancy car, but no time to be picky. We’ll go for the one closest to the elevators—*

The elevator stopped on floor 25.

With a gentle electronic ding, the metal doors automatically parted.

“Oh, there you are.”

And then Hamazura heard the voice of despair.

One of School’s members came walking out into the hallway: The number-two Level Five who could even fight Shizuri Mugino. With strange nails attached to his right hand, the man approached slowly.

“I was looking all over for you, y’know! You’re the search esper, right?” he said, tossing *something* he’d been dragging with his left hand to them. “It” flew a few meters and landed at Hamazura’s feet. “It” was Saiai Kinuhata, with whom they’d just parted.

“…!!”

“She made a good decision. Item’s core isn’t the Level-Five—it’s you, right? Man, if you’d gotten out of here, that would’ve been rough. On the other hand…” Teitoku’s voice lowered. “You can’t run away at this point.”

Each of his steps counted down the lives of Hamazura and Takitsubo.

Hamazura turned his attention to the gun up his sleeve. Then, looking at the open elevator out of the corner of his

eye, he spoke to Takitsubo in as quiet a voice as he could. “(…You get on the elevator and go down.)”

“(…But Hamazura—,)” she whispered back.

“(…Either way, if I abandoned you and ran away from School, it would mean the end of Item! Damn it, I’m caught between a rock and a hard place!!)”

Teitoku Kakine stopped walking.

He wasn’t hesitating, nor was he trying to let them go. He was already in effective range as a Level Five. “So what’re you gonna do? How long do good-byes usually take?”

“…!! Go!!”

Hamazura tried to push Takitsubo into the elevator.

But instead, she reached for his hand.

Their positions whirled around like they were ballroom dancing, and then she pushed him toward the elevator. Hamazura, confused at the sudden act, fell onto his rear.

Only Takitsubo’s hand went into the elevator.

She pressed the B1 button—for the underground parking garage.

“What the hell are you—?”

“Sorry, Hamazura.” From the other side of the automatically closing doors, Takitsubo gazed at him. “I asked everyone about the furnace. I don’t want you to turn into ashes like that.”

Her eyes were smiling softly.

“It’s okay. I’m a Level Four, and you’re a Level Zero. I promise I’ll protect you.”

“…!!”

Before he could say anything, the door finished closing and the elevator began dropping like a rock. Something absurd had just happened, but on the other hand, he was out of immediate danger, and he felt an odd sense of relief wash over him.

Still sitting on the floor, he put his back to the wall and looked up at the ceiling.

Weren't espers supposed to think our lives weren't worth anything? he thought as the floaty sensation unique to fast--moving elevators came over him. He put a hand over his face, still looking up. *There are heaps of us. We're like disposable umbrellas. Even if we die, we're supposed to get burned to a crisp in an incinerator and our ashes thrown out with the rest of the trash.*

"Damn it," he mumbled.

Hamazura probably hadn't been the only one experiencing shock when he cooked the black sleeping bag in that furnace. The girl watching from behind him had been shocked just the same. Had Rikou Takitsubo always wanted to protect people like him, or had the furnace incident given her a change of heart? He didn't know.

But he did know one thing.

Rikou Takitsubo had stood up to the number-two man in Academy City to save him, a Level Zero.

"…This is a load of crap," he mumbled, putting a hand on the wall and slowly getting up. "This is a load of bullshit!!"

He slammed the wall with his open hand, pounding a button on it and causing the elevator to stop.

Clenching his teeth, he took a few deep breaths. To be honest, he had virtually no chance of winning. That Kakine guy was a Level Five, and he wasn't the only bad guy. He at least had those black-clothed guys, probably from their ancillary organization.

But…

"Is there even a place for Level Zeroes? Of course there is. Can you get by without victimizing other people? Of course you can, damn it!!"

Once, he'd met a Level Zero completely different from him in the Dangai University database center, and now his words naturally came to mind.

"You had enough strength to form Skill-Out— If you'd

used that to help people in weaker positions, you'd all be in a different place right now!! You had the strength to fight back against strong espers— If you'd used that to reach out to people in need, everyone in Academy City would have accepted you!!"

"…Yeah."

Shiage Hamazura pushed the button for the twenty-fifth floor again, where he'd parted with Takitsubo, and closed the elevator doors.

"*That's right, asshole*," he declared, cutting off his own retreat and returning to the battlefield where the Level Five waited.

5

The elevator stopped on the twenty-fifth floor.

The automatic doors opened, and Hamazura passed through them to find the scene he'd predicted.

"What? Came back, eh?" stated School's Level Five, Teitoku Kakine.

Near him, in the same position as she had been when he'd thrown her, was Saia Kinuhata.

And at the unscathed man's feet was Rikou Takitsubo, head down, face unreadable, limp on the floor. He couldn't even tell whether she was alive or dead.

Kakine cracked his neck joints. "I gotta tell you, she's got no direct combat skills, but she came at me pretty hard. Must have been an application of her search ability—she interfered with my involuntary diffusion field and then reversed it, trying to hijack my own ability. Sheesh, if she'd developed normally, she could have been the eighth one."

Each word of praise just sounded like he was making a fool of her.

Hamazura didn't say a word. Silently, he whipped out the gun hidden up his sleeve and pointed it at him.

"Oh, you weren't finished yet?"

Suddenly, another voice.

A girl wearing a fancy dress came around the corner behind Kakine.

The…the crane girl from before?!

Hamazura hesitated for a moment about where to aim.

“You’d better not.”

That moment, Shiage Hamazura lost the ability to move even a finger.

“I would’ve needed to kill you before, but now that I have the Tweezers, I don’t have to—you’re only part of their ancillary organization.”

His body wasn’t paralyzed for any reason. Physically, he was totally fine. But there was an idea blossoming in his mind—one that he couldn’t shoot even if he wanted to.

He felt like he was trying to stomp on a kitten taking a nap.

He felt like he was trying to kill a sick kid to steal his valuables.

He felt like he was accidentally pointing his gun at Rikou Takitsubo.

“You’ve got a mean face, but you’re a nice person on the inside. I knew I should have used my power from the start,” said the girl in the dress, smiling. “My Heart Measure can freely control the distance between people’s hearts. What do you think would happen if I set us to the same distance as all of your friends?”

“Ugh…!!” *What is this? Some kind of telepathy?!*

“Why not call it quits?” she continued. “Right now, I’m at a distance of twenty units…In other words, the same distance as between Shiage Hamazura and Rikou Takitsubo. You can’t shoot Takitsubo, so you can’t shoot me. I know you came all the way back up here for her sake. You’d never be able to hurt her, would you?”

The gun clattered, shaking in his trembling hand.

He couldn’t do it. He knew Takitsubo and the girl in the dress were different people, but he just couldn’t do it.

Kakine made a look like his fun was spoiled. “This is dumb. Now it seems like we’re the bad guys.”

“Hey, a boy and a girl protecting each other is romantic. It’s so rare I almost don’t want to break it.”

“Yeah. It’s too bad. Wonder if she’ll do us a favor and die without us doing anything.”

Hamazura’s shoulders jolted at that. “What the hell…? What do you mean?”

Kakine kicked the clear case near Takitsubo over in his direction. “The Crystals. Did you know she was using them?”

“…Yeah, for her ability…”

“Strictly speaking, they induce a physical rejection and make her ability go out of control. More specifically, they used ’em in the Explosion Experiment for Analyzing Runaway Ability Laws. Most of the time, it’s nothing but a-disadvantage—but in really rare cases, someone’ll be able to get better results when berserked. This girl was probably one of them.”

Kakine sounded like having to explain every little thing was boring him.

“She won’t last long in this state. She might be fine if she never uses her ability again, but one or two more times and she’ll break down.”

Break down. The unsettling phrase made Hamazura grimace.

Kakine ignored him and went on. “We don’t even need to finish her off like this. Without her search ability, her death doesn’t mean much.”

“Just so we’re clear, she collapsed of her own volition,” the girl said flatly. “It’s because she kept forcing herself to use those Crystals to fight against School in this building—if we were really going in for the kill, there’d be nothing left.”

Hamazura glared at her, unable to move in any meaningful way, even as the two School members ignored him and pushed the elevator button.

“Anyway, now what?” said Kakine simply as they waited. “Kill him, or let him live?”

“Leaving him be won’t be a problem, will it? Item’s on the brink of destruction anyway. They can’t stop us.”

Hamazura gnashed his teeth at the words “brink of destruction,” but he just couldn’t pull the trigger. Her Heart Measure ability had him completely under her control.

“Killing him would be easier.”

“Look, didn’t your personal reality get messed up through your IDF because of the search ability? Shouldn’t you check yourself? You going out of control is a lot more dangerous than a near-dead Item. I’d rather not die because an ally went on a berserk rampage.”

Teitoku Kakine cracked his neck again, annoyed. He wasn’t holding a gun. He must have had just that much faith in his ability. But if worse came to worst and his ability *did* go haywire, Kakine himself would be the first one caught up in it.

“Guess I don’t have a choice. Let’s go back. The check is simple, but we don’t have the machine here.”

As though timed, the elevator arrived on this floor.

Shit!! Hamazura pushed the gun’s hammer up with his thumb.

But the dress girl’s face remained steady. “Our current distance is twenty. The same as between Shiage Hamazura and Rikou Takitsubo. But I can make the distance even shorter, you know.”

“!!”

“There’s nothing sadder than plastering false emotions over real ones. You should share your happiness of surviving this with that near-dead girl over there.”

The two got into the elevator, Hamazura unable to stop them, and the automatic doors closed.

He looked down at the Crystal case at his feet, then at the unresponsive Rikou Takitsubo, and slowly sat down.

If she uses her ability a couple more times, she’ll break

down…

Hamazura, being a stupid delinquent, didn’t know what “break down” entailed, exactly. But he could guess it was nothing good.

What should I do?

He peered at her face. Her body wasn’t even twitching. No sign of her waking up, either. She must have put a lot of excess strain on herself, too, since she was covered in a layer of thick sweat.

Rikou Takitsubo had fought Kakine until she’d gotten like this.

Probably to save Shiage Hamazura.

While borrowing the power of these Crystals he didn’t understand.

“…” He quietly clenched his teeth.

It didn’t amount to enough to be called resolve, and it wasn’t refined enough to be called determination. But he still had something now—something to drive him, to move his own arms and legs with.

“Damn it…”

He couldn’t return Rikou Takitsubo to Item. Their system would gladly replace official members if they disappeared. Even if he brought her there in her critical state, they’d cruelly force her to use her ability.

As his hands trembled, he took the ladies’ gun out of his sleeve. He pulled the magazine out and checked his ammunition. It couldn’t hold much, given how narrow the grip was built to be. Besides, even with thousands of bullets on him, could he really overcome the crisis he was about to face? Academy City’s underworld would chase Takitsubo down, and even Item had enemies. Could he fight them all?

“God damn it!!”

He had to.

If they made Takitsubo use her ability any more than this, it would really be over.

Then Kinuhata, lying on the floor with her, looked over at

him without moving anything else. She seemed to guess the situation from his irritation. “…Well, that’s probably the right thing. Take Takitsubo somewhere else and disappear, please.”

“Thanks.”

“I didn’t say anything you needed to thank me for. I’m just insulting you. I’m saying that the only thing super--useless people like you and her are good for in Item is holding us back anyway.”

Despite that, a little smile was on her lips.

She wasn’t unharmed, either. Blood was trickling from her lips. But she saw him act for Takitsubo’s sake and smiled anyway.

“Is there anything I can do before I leave?”

“…Well, you could use code five-two to contact our ancillary organization and get an information concealing unit and an ambulance here, please. As you can see, I can’t move.”

“All right,” said Hamazura. It pained him to leave her here, but for now, he had to take Takitsubo and escape.

In any case, we’re fine as long as she doesn’t use her ability. She’ll have to retire from Item, but that’s a lot better than “breaking down” or whatever, he thought.

But just then, his cell phone rang.

On the other end was Shizuri Mugino.

“Haamaazuraaaa. Would Rikou Takitsubo happen to be with you?”

“…Are you all right?! You were fighting Kakine, and, and…!!”

“Quit making such a fuss. It’s time we started our counterattack on School. We’re using Takitsubo’s power and chasing them. If she’s there, bring her here, now. *We’re getting results even if it kills her.*”

6

Hamazura, with the corpse-like, unmoving Takitsubo on his back, left the building. He wasn't obeying Shizuri Mugino's orders and making her use her ability. Quite the opposite. He would run as far away as he could, so that she would have no part in Item in the future.

He was on a short bridge now. It wasn't water flowing underneath, but a railroad track. It was one of the parts of the subway line that went aboveground. A sports car was parked on the other side of the bridge.

"So I don't know what's going on, but you want me to take her, yeah?"

It was an Anti-Skill officer named Aiho Yomikawa who had gotten out of said car and was now putting a hand on her hip in exasperation.

The escape routes and hiding places they used were also used by all of Item, which meant Mugino would easily find out. He decided the better plan would be to give her to someone with a completely different escape route.

"Hamazura, you know what my job is, right? I'm an Anti--Skill officer, 'kay? You think I'd let you escape alone after coming to me in this extremely suspicious situation with an unconscious girl on your back?"

"…Shut up," said Hamazura, gritting his teeth. Yomikawa frowned a little—his irritation seemed different. He went on, "If you want an explanation, I'll tell you whatever you want later. I'll attend whatever I need to! Take her and bring her somewhere safe, and fast!! She's seriously messed up right now. She was using some Crystal things and now she could break down any second!!"

"Crystals…? Wait, Hamazura, did you just say Crystals?!"

Yomikawa's expression changed completely just from that one word, but Hamazura didn't explain.

He didn't have the time.

"…Haaamazuraaa."

Suddenly, he heard a voice from behind.

He turned around and saw Shizuri Mugino, covered in

blood, on the other side of the short bridge. Some blood was hers, some wasn't. She was dragging some rags in her right hand—and he knew what they were.

"Frenda…"

To be more accurate, only her upper half.

Her lower half was nowhere in sight, and dark red dripped and dropped from her terminus.

"Oh, yes. It looks like School scared her, so she betrayed Item and tried to go into hiding. I cleaned her up real nice… And what's this, now? I don't have to clean *you* up, too, do I?"

Mugino let go, and what was left of Frenda dropped to the ground with a *blotch*.

She wasn't paying attention to her trophy anymore.

That showed the depth of their friendship.

Hamazura grimaced at the sight—clearly a corpse, unlike Takitsubo. But he still wouldn't waver. He pushed the girl on his back onto Yomikawa and said quietly, "…Please, go."

"Hamazura, like I said, I'm an Anti-Skill officer. I could never use a child as a shield in this situation—"

"Go, damn it!!" he shouted, interrupting her. "I know you can't leave a murder case alone. But she's in a different dimension! I can't tell you the details, but Frenda was really strong herself. And that woman killed her, no problem! Just take Takitsubo and get out of here!!"

After that, his expression about to break down, he looked at the unconscious Takitsubo.

"Please…I don't want to let her die. For a while, I haven't had any idea what to do, but now I finally found something. So please, go. I can't protect her alone. Without your help, I'll lose everything!!"

"Hamazura…"

"Anyway, what chance would you have alone?! She's a Level Five. The fourth-most-terrifying monster in Academy City! I'll buy you time, so you get Takitsubo out of here!!"

The words seemed to tear his throat apart. Yomikawa

sucked in her breath at his fierce look. She hesitated—but nevertheless, spurred by the glint in his eyes, nodded at last.

“Once I’ve brought her somewhere safe, I’ll get fully equipped officers here right away. Don’t die before then.”

“…Right,” he answered.

Yomikawa decisively got into the car and stepped on the accelerator. The sports car, with Rikou Takitsubo on board, quickly sped away.

He heard someone whistling.

Hamazura looked over just as the Level Five Shizuri Mugino was crossing the bridge and approaching him.

“A fight with your life on the line? How exhilarating, Hamazura.”

“I—”

It was just when he tried to say something.

Mugino, now close to him, waved her hand horizontally. He took the hit, and his body went flying to the side. With a dull crack, the bridge’s metal handrail dug into his gut. The shock brought bile up into his throat. The power almost left his limbs as he hung across the railing like a futon set out to dry. Right under the bridge, he saw a subway train going by on the tracks.

“Quiet. I didn’t ask for your opinion.”

Ignoring Hamazura’s moans, Mugino crossed the rest of the bridge.

She hadn’t used her power as a Level Five. It was just brute force. She’d purposely made him yield to physical strength so he couldn’t use their relative levels as an excuse.

She hadn’t given up yet. She wanted to know where School was even if Takitsubo “broke down” because of it.

“Ha-ha,” he laughed anyway, still limp on the handrail. “You sure you don’t want to just finish me off?”

“Eh?” Mugino turned an indignant glare on him.

Then her eyes went wide.

The case of Crystals that Rikou Takitsubo had been using was in Shiage Hamazura's hand.

"She absolutely needs these to use Ability Stalker, doesn't she?"

"You bastard…!!"

Before clear rage could make it into her eyes, Hamazura went over the metal handrail and jumped off the bridge.

A subway car was passing by just at that moment.

He crashed into the car's roof. People usually perceived them as flat, but subway cars actually had outer air conditioners and such on their roofs, making them fairly uneven. When he landed, he rolled several times, his skin tearing as though he'd been dragged over a grater, and the momentum almost carried him straight off the car. But he managed to dig in and stop.

Sprawled out on the subway car's roof, he grinned. *Looks like I managed to shake her off. Without these Crystals, she can't make Takitsubo use her ability. I don't have to fight her. As long as these don't make it into Mugino's hands—*

Suddenly, with a massive jolt, the train car stopped.

He slid across the roof. As he stopped himself and looked up, startled, he saw Mugino standing far behind them on the rails. Like Hamazura, she'd jumped off the bridge. Her hand was deep inside the ground—the ground within which the electric cables for Academy City's subways ran. Mugino had used her ability to sever those cables, forcing the train car to come to a stop.

A few hundred meters away, Shizuri Mugino said something.

He couldn't hear her, but he could read her lips.

Now. You're. Dead. For. Sure.

7

Hamazura, on the train car roof, got the message from

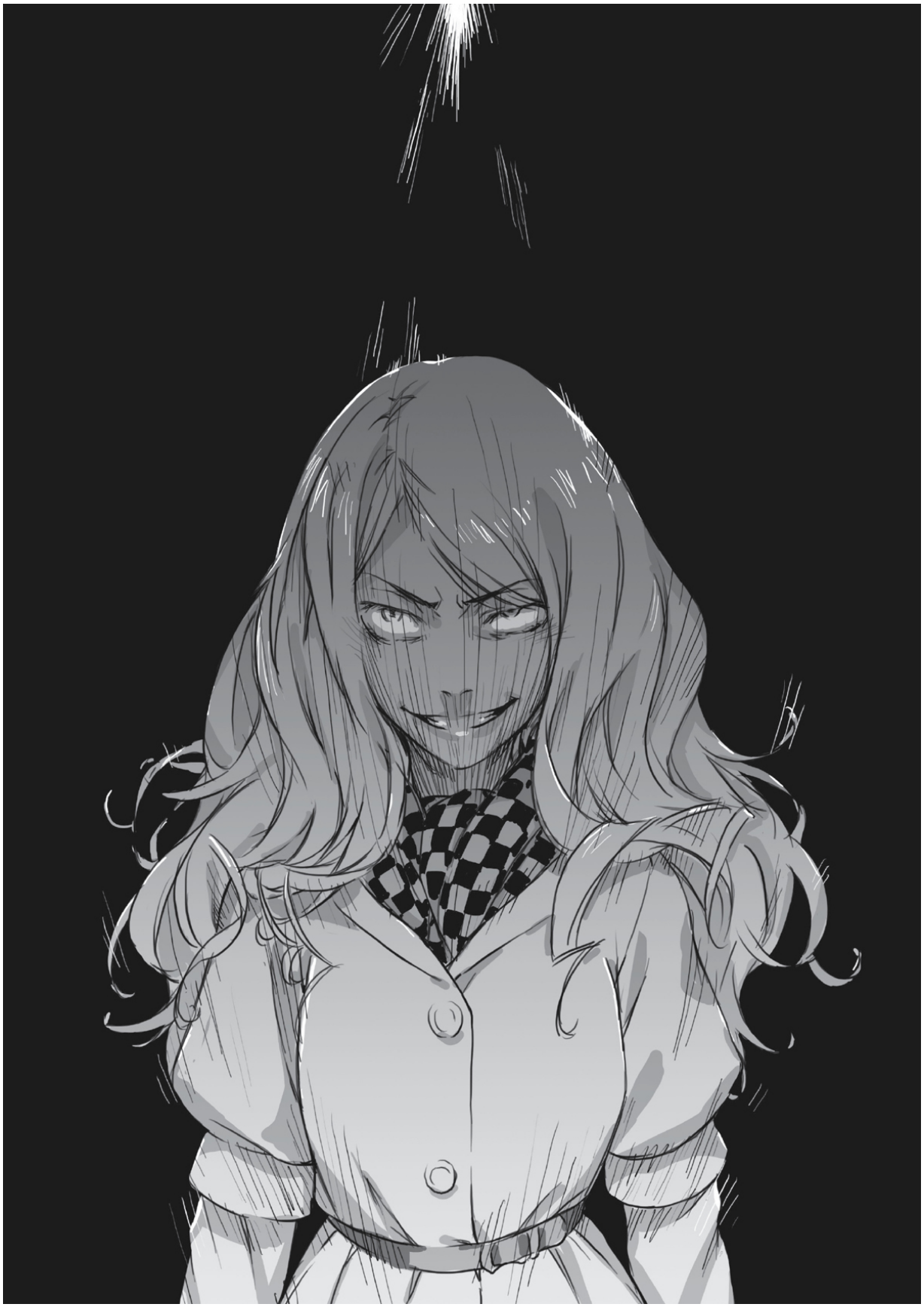
Mugino.

The Level Five had stopped the car by force, and now she had a sharp, enraged grin on her face.

“…!!” Hamazura’s hair stood on end. He quickly jumped from the car roof and ran across the gravel. He was blocked off on either side by concrete walls, like this was a man--made river, but spotted a metal staircase interrupting one. He ran up those stairs and burst out into the streets aboveground.

He cast a glance over his shoulder.

Mugino was ascending the stairs, not far behind. In spite of the twenty or thirty meters between them, she was staring straight at him through the crowds. She’d already locked onto Shiage Hamazura as her prey.





Shit!! I can't even shake her in a crowd!!

He kept on running, slipping between the people enjoying their days off. But he soon reached his limit. He looked around, then headed for a nearby building. Without checking if the door was locked, he basically gave it a shoulder tackle to force open the entrance and rolled inside.

"…Damn. Where am I…?"

This wasn't a normal company building. Trees a little taller than Hamazura were planted all over the floor. A wire netting hung overhead, and the trees' branches tangled around it. Grapes. He looked down and saw a line of hydroponic containers. The bluish-purple illumination must have been ultraviolet light to stimulate photosynthesis.

An automatic manufacturing plant for vegetable ethanol fuel?

Research on gasoline substitutes had come a long way. Sugar cane and corn were the usual culprits, but judging by the purposeful choice of grapes, which had a low alcohol production rate, it probably meant the grapes were of the finest quality, with a serious consideration on branding. Apparently District 3's celebrities wanted even the fuel they put in their cars to be different from the norm. Were they trying to make their engines drink wine, or what?

"What a nice place."

The voice came from directly behind him. He tensed.

"That's some good sense to choose an unmanned facility, Hamazura. It's best if you're the only one to die."

Before he could turn around in a panic, he felt the impact.

Gwa-thud!! With a nasty noise, Hamazura's body flew several meters away before hitting the ground. In grand style, he overturned the hydroponic containers, cracked through several grape vines, and kept on rolling along.

The one hit, liable to kill him outright, caused intense pain all over.

It was very strange that none of his bones were broken.

“Damn it…!!”

Hamazura dragged his bruised body out of the room. There was a staircase, so he went up it. Upstairs, he found rows of silver machines twice his height and straight metal piping connected to them. It looked like a beer production plant, the kind he saw in commercials once in a while. They were fermenting grapes and using the alcohol content from them, after all, so it was probably mostly the same on the inside. There would have also been machines to concentrate the alcohol and convert it into automobile fuel.

Compared to before, there were more blind spots.

She might be a Level Five, but that doesn’t mean she’s invincible.

Hamazura wriggled through the intricate pipes, then pushed his back up against the wall of a machine the size of a small room, desperately searching for an advantage.

Back when I got attacked by that crane truck outside the Particle Physics Institute, she didn’t use her power to destroy the wrecking ball. And with the subway before, too —she didn’t try to stop the speeding car itself. She aimed for the power line in the ground.

He clenched his teeth against the pain going through him and looked for a way out.

She’s incredibly strong, but I bet she needs a certain amount of time to take aim. In other words, she’s weak to surprise attacks. She shouldn’t be able to deal with a sudden attack from the shadows.

That wasn’t because her power was commonplace, but rather a weakness born of it being too strong. Unless she was meticulous and defined her ability’s area of effect, she could get herself caught in it.

Whatever the reason, he didn’t care, as long as she had a disadvantage.

With all the obstacles there, Shiage Hamazura should have had some chance at victory.

But…

“Haaamazuraaa.”

One word. Just hearing the voice made Hamazura’s body scream of danger.

Abandoning all logic, he went down to the floor—and a moment later, it came.

Zzzhhhaaa!! A rain of light rays.

Pure-white, unhealthy-looking rays of light lashed out in all directions from around the woman named Shizuri Mugino. They were special electron beams, each fired with as much energy as a lightning strike. Electrons, like light, exhibited properties of both particles and waves, depending on the situation, but Mugino could control electrons in a vague state between those.

When these electrons, stuck in an ambiguous state, collided with an object, they wouldn’t be able to determine which response to exhibit—a wave or a particle—and would end up “stopping” in place. The mass of an electron was supposed to be infinitely close to zero, but because of this stopping effect, they would turn into a pseudo-wall, which would smash into the target with terrible force, given the speed the electrons were fired at.

That was Meltdown.

Its formal classification: a high-speed particle-wave cannon.

Unlike the number-three Railgun, this Level Five could control electrons without using either waves or particles.

Each of the light beams destroyed metal like it was paper, melted down thick walls, and painted everything in an orange hue. As though heat had made it to the already--produced alcohol, small explosions were triggered in a few places. Hamazura managed to avoid a direct hit, but a metal fragment the size of a guitar pick stabbed into his left shoulder. And it didn’t stop at one—three or four more

followed.

“Guh, *ahhhhhhhh*!!” he screamed, holding his bloody shoulder.

If his cover was in her way, she would make short work of it. With everything reduced to rubble and the room now flattened, Hamazura and Mugino hopelessly faced each other.

“The machines around here—they’re just like those things you use to scoop goldfish. Uhh, I forget the name. Anyway, none of this can block my Meltdown.”

Academy City’s number four.

She’d reduced all the machines covering the room to rubble in a single attack. She’d wrecked all possible cover, even doing major damage to the outer walls—and with the building itself now in danger of falling, Mugino stood in the center of the destruction and slowly, slowly widened her smile.

“According to those shithead scholars, my biological instincts put a safety on my ability, so this is all the power I can use. But I hear that originally, it could instantly kill Railgun. I guess that’s just me complaining, though—if I actually did it, the recoil would apparently blow my own body to pieces, too.”

Fear washed over Shiage Hamazura like a wave.

The Level Five monster merely approached him without a word.

8

Shizuri Mugino’s Meltdown fired with overwhelming force.

With the rubble behind him, Hamazura ran for his life, trying to get as far away from her as he could.

As he fled from the vegetable ethanol plant to another part of the building, Mugino called out.

“Hamazuraaa. Couldn’t you please stop making this difficult and hand over the Crystals and Takitsubo already? I

won’t be satisfied until I’ve killed every single person in School.”

As he ran, Hamazura rejected her words. “I refuse. I’m not letting Takitsubo use the Crystals anymore. She’s at her limit!”

“So what? If Takitsubo dies, we can just get another esper to replace her. She’s probably the only one who can search for people by their involuntary diffusion fields, but I don’t mind having an esper who does it differently. As long as we know where the School bastards are, we don’t have any problem.”

Hamazura made it to the area where the remnants of grapes were temporarily gathered once the alcohol had been wrung out. But Mugino’s Meltdown reduced that place to a mountain of debris in mere seconds.

As he hid behind a heap of hot metal, Hamazura said, “… Sorry, but I can’t go with you.”

“Eh?”

“You can’t beat that Kakine guy. You’ve already *run away twice*—once at the Particle Physics Institute, and again during the last battle.”

He thought he heard her grating her teeth.

But he continued anyway. “Now that I faced him personally, I know. It’s not about you being fourth place and him being second. You’d lose to him in a different way. What good is it going to do for you now, finding out where he is?”

The people in School were perverted in their own way, but they at least let people farther down the scale escape. Even when their enemy, Takitsubo, exhausted her strength, they didn’t move in for the kill.

Meanwhile, Shizuri Mugino was baring her fangs at even her allies, just because she didn’t like it. She didn’t seem stronger than them. However overwhelming her power, that impression didn’t change.

“Being able to win or not isn’t the problem. Even if you risked your life and won, all anyone would get out of it is-

self-satisfaction. I can’t let Takitsubo go along with something that petty. You’d squander her life away on that?”

“Hah. Ha-ha!!”

Even when she heard Shiage Hamazura’s answer, Mugino just laughed it off. She slowly followed him as he changed cover, from rubble to rubble, to get away from her.

“How did she train you, Hamazura? Did her cute face make you do it? Or was it because she was nice to you even though you’re a Level Zero?”

When Hamazura stayed silent, Mugino’s smile deepened.

“There’s a word for you: an idiot. Is everyone who says nice things to you a good person, and everything who says harsh things to you a bad guy?! You talk like you’re the center of the world!!”

“…I know that.”

Hamazura didn’t deny it.

If Rikou Takitsubo hadn’t said those nice things to him, he wouldn’t have changed his mind.

“But she said she didn’t want me to die to some calculating bastard like you. She’s capable of saying things like that, you know! A girl like her deserves to be happy. Neither of us is fit to stand above others. If a nice idiot doesn’t get to the top and lead us all to a new kind of society, this shithole of a world will never be saved!!”

He didn’t get an answer.

Instead, with a *roar*, light rays so white it was like a nuclear explosion blew away both Hamazura and the pile of metal he was hiding behind. The blast sent him careening back, but suddenly, he felt the presence of someone right along his back.

Before he turned around, he noticed something felt off in his right ear.

Shizuri Mugino had stuck a screwdriver into it.

“Hey, wait. It looks like you have a screw loose in your head.”

*Slshh…*The screwdriver’s tip slowly went into his ear.

“Want me to screw it back in for you?”

He couldn’t move. If he moved his head at all, it would damage the inside of his ear and he’d start bleeding everywhere. As Mugino maintained their positions, she brought her empty left hand in front of him and held out her palm.

She was telling him to give her the Crystals.

Hamazura reached into his pocket.

The clear case with the Crystals was inside.

Damn it…

He clenched his teeth, shut his eyes, and made up his mind.

Whirl!!

He disregarded the screwdriver and whipped around.

9

Shiage Hamazura ignored the screwdriver in his ear and twisted his body.

“Wha—?”

Even Mugino seemed a little surprised.

The screwdriver chewed up the inside of his ear. Unimaginably intense pain exploded in his head, and sounds on his right became muted like he had put in an earplug. On top of that, for some reason, half his vision seemed faintly red.

He ignored it all and took the Crystal case out of his pocket.

It was a small, rectangular, clear case, like the tubing inside a mechanical pencil.

He squeezed it, and using its corner, shoved it lengthways into the clinging Mugino’s face.

It crushed her right eye in an instant, like a pirate captain.

“Guh, *ooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh*!!”

Mugino wobbled backward, grasping at her red, dripping face with her hands.

Hamazura watched quietly and smiled. “A Level Five’s eye for a Level Zero’s ear…Bargain shopping, am I right?”

When Mugino heard that, her face distorted in anger. “Hamazuraaaaa!!”

Bam!! A flash of light burst from her.

Her left arm, from hand to elbow, blew away as though it had melted. The pure-white light it created aimed at Hamazura’s face. She was trying to fire her weapon without taking precise aim first.

“…!!”

Hamazura swung his head out of the way a moment before.

It was total coincidence that he dodged an overwhelming attack like that.

Mugino reached out with her blood-covered right hand, shoved Hamazura to the ground—he had lost his balance, and was unsteady—and climbed on top of him. As she did, the case of Crystals left his hand and clattered across the floor. Mugino wasn’t paying attention to that anymore.

Glaring at Hamazura through her remaining left eye, she screamed, overtaken with fury. “It doesn’t matter!! *It doesn’t fucking matter!!* An ear? An eye?! You can break off my limbs and crush my heart and it wouldn’t change the fact that I’m stronger than you! This is what a Level Five is. I am the fourth-ranked Meltdown!! Don’t get full of yourself, bastard. I could kill a hundred of you fucking Level Zeroes without even moving a finger!!”

As spittle flew from her mouth, Mugino grabbed Hamazura’s neck with her right hand. If she activated her ability like this, she’d definitely annihilate his head.

Hamazura smiled as she held his neck like a can of juice.

The strength left his body as though he had given up on something.

“…Hey, I’m no idiot. I figured this would happen,” he said, listening to Mugino’s ragged breathing. “You’re the kind of person who can’t be satisfied unless she can beat a video game without dying. The slightest mistake, and you fly into a rage—and even if you see the ending, you’re not happy.”

“Eh?”

“When people like that make a tiny mistake, they’ll find another goal so they can write it off. If you can’t win without dying, you’ll get a new high score and be satisfied…You never needed to obsess over some boring Level Zero. You should have just used your Level Five shit and sniped me from far away.”

He grinned.

“What I’m saying is that wasting time to come here and declare victory was a fatal opening!”

Shka!!

It was the sound of Shiage Hamazura stretching his arm, and the ladies’ gun up his sleeve sliding out.

“Wha—?”

Before Mugino could say anything, Hamazura pulled the trigger.

Bang, bang, bam!! With a series of dry sounds, several holes opened up in her upper body. Hamazura kept on firing until he ran out of bullets, and even after that, his index finger continued to move for a while.

“…”

Mugino looked at the blood all over her, surprised.

Eventually, she rolled limply to the side, fell to the floor, and stopped moving.

“Easy win, Level Five,” said Hamazura casually, dragging his own beat-up body to its feet. He picked up the case of Crystals and put it back in his pocket.

He probably couldn’t have beaten her if he’d taken his

gun out right away. She would have easily used her ability to protect herself. He needed to be stingy about it until the very last moment. Even when she put the screwdriver in his ear, he hadn't taken it out—to lull her into a false sense of security, that he had no actual weapons.

Ritoku Komaba, Skill-Out's leader, had once locked out Academy City's strongest Level Five's ability and gotten within inches of taking his life. Hamazura had done the same kind of thing.

He pushed his pinkie into his wounded right ear.

The eardrum didn't seem damaged. His finger came out with a clump of blood, and some of his hearing returned.

"…Sheesh. Bargain shopping indeed," he grumbled, about to leave.

"…ma…zura…"

Then a voice, as though from the depths of hell, gave Hamazura a terrible chill up his spine.

He slowly turned around.

"Hamazuraaaa

But Shiage Hamazura had made up his mind. He simply stepped forcefully in, gripped his fist tight as a boulder, stared straight into the face of the enemy he had to defeat, and let loose the strongest, fastest attack he could.

A loud *slam* thundered through the room.

The energy left Shizuri Mugino's body; she crumpled to her knees, then to the floor. The terrible white light in her hand melted into the air and vanished. There was no danger there.

Hamazura picked up the gun he'd thrown away, then looked down at the unmoving Mugino and took his cell phone out of his pocket. He called up Yomikawa, who had given him her number when she'd put him in custody, saying something about being there if he wanted to talk.

"It's Hamazura. Don't need Anti-Skill support anymore," he said, walking through the demolished building, heading for the exit.

"Yeah. I ended it all."

10

Shiage Hamazura left the District 3 vegetable ethanol plant. Several people from Item's ancillary were standing by to erase all the evidence, but nobody stopped him. From the looks of things, he'd just crushed the fourth-ranked Level Five in Academy City. Nobody would want to foolishly lay a hand on him.

"Yo."

A figure standing a short distance away from the building saw him and spoke up.

"Hanzou?"

Delinquent members with their bases in District 7 had nothing to do with the celebrity-filled District 3. It couldn't have been a coincidence he was there. Had he tapped into

their radio or something?

“Heard all about it, Hamazura.”

“What, and how much?”

“You beat a Level Five on your own, right?”

Some information source he’s got, thought Hamazura with a sigh, then he remembered something. “It came in handy, by the way.”

“It?”

“The girl gun. If you hadn’t given it to me, I’d be dead.”

“Hah. If you took down a Level Five with that tiny little gun, that makes you a real beast.” Hanzou took out a cigarette, then handed a second one to Hamazura. “Well, isn’t that a nice little present? With all this under your belt, nobody would turn you down. Not that many people actually hate you anyway.”

“…”

“Your old position’s available, Hamazura. A bunch of others are waiting for you, too.”

“Sorry,” said Hamazura, lighting the cigarette and grinning. “I found something else to do.”

“*Pfft.* Now I’m jealous.”

Nevertheless, Hanzou didn’t persist. The fact that Hamazura, of all people, had stood up to the monster that was Shizuri Mugino all on his own—he could sense something different about his state of mind.

“Whatever. I’ll round up Skill-Out for the time being.”

“Thanks.”

“But don’t forget about us. We’ll save you a seat. Come on back when you’re done.”

They talked, they laughed, and they bumped fists, before each headed for his own destination.

INTERLUDE FOUR

After holing up in a hotel room for about an hour, the girl in the dress went back to School's hideout. Teitoku Kakine, Level Five, was in there.

"Huh? Where'd you go, exactly?"

"Just making a little pocket change. Academics are the worst, you know. They calculate a base rate and don't bother tipping."

"Hmm. One hour—sounds like a rousing time."

"I wasn't doing anything shameful. We got a hotel room, sure, but we just flipped through magazines and talked a bit."

"…Not having sex?"

"No! And I didn't need to. It depends on the person, but my 'customers' don't generally come looking for something like that. Do you know why rich people go to stores and give money to women? It's not because they have some sexual desires they want to fulfill. They just want to form a personal relationship by themselves outside of work."

"Strange world," said Kakine.

The girl in the dress seemed half-exasperated. "You know workaholics, right? Their jobs are so much fun for them that they wreck their families because of it. For them, relationships they can build with money are like salvation. Money is the result of their work. They use it to buy friendship and love, and then get the satisfaction that they made personal relationships on their own, or really are fit

for this society. I'm just relieving some of the complex they feel by having money."

"Right," said Kakine, his voice perfectly uninterested.

The girl in the dress lost the will to explain. "Oh, right," she said. "Looks like Item, the ones we were after, are out of business. Infighting. Shizuri Mugino, number four, went down, and now they can't keep their group together."

"Huh? Infighting— So Mugino escaped my attack…But wait, who took her out? Frenda ran away after making a deal with us, and we crushed Saiai Kinuhata. Rikou Takitsubo doesn't have any direct fighting power, so…"

He stopped. "No…"

"Yes. If it wasn't an official member, it's most likely someone from their ancillary group."

They both thought of the Level Zero who had come back up into the elevator lobby to protect Rikou Takitsubo. Kakine whistled in praise.

The girl stared at him. "Anyway, how's the analysis on the Tweezers going?"

Teitoku Kakine wore a mechanical glove on his right hand, and two clear nails were equipped to its index and middle fingers. Plus, though you couldn't see it with the naked eye; the nails were filled with silicon chunks absorbed from the air. Although they were chunks, they were only seventy nanometers across—you'd have to use an electron microscope to observe them.

"I always had doubts," said Kakine, clicking the nails together. "That jackass Aleister *always knows too much about what we're doing*. He's not just watching through the surveillance cameras, security robots, or satellites. I was always confused about how he got his information."

"…"

"Turns out, it's nothing much. He just has about fifty million invisible machines floating around the city he pulls intel from. It's no wonder he knows the place inside and out."

It was called the Underline.

It took the form of a spherical body, with three wiry cilia extending from each side. It didn't walk along the ground to move—it was closer to drifting through the air.

These ultra-small machines rode on convection currents in the air to generate their own power, pseudo-perpetually gathering information and using a straight electron beam to send internally produced quantum signals to and from the Underline, creating a sort of network. The Underline was the only place information entered the Windowless Building, and naturally, the little things would contain several pieces of information powerful enough to shake the world.

"But even knowing the Underline exists, it's really hard to find machines you'd need an electron microscope for. And even if I did catch them, I'd have no way to get information out of them. After all, you'd have to pry open a-nano-sized device and hook up to its circuitry. On top of that, I hear the quantum signals inside them would get changed if an outside source carelessly observed it."

That was where the Tweezers came in.

However small the nanodevices were, the Tweezers would have no problems, since they were developed to grab elementary particles themselves. They would make it possible to extract information from the Underline.

The girl in the dress looked at Kakine and asked, "What did the analysis show?"

"What we thought it would," answered Kakine. "It won't work. There's a lot of data stored in the Underline, but I don't think this by itself will put us on an equal playing field with Aleister. We'll need one last push, in addition to this data."

"Then we're going to do it?"

"…Yeah. We'll kill Academy City's number one. That's the only way. If we want to have an advantage negotiating with Aleister, a spare won't cut it. Instead, I'll have to become a

main.”

“I see,” replied the girl, not particularly emotive. “Doesn’t matter to me. I’m still not getting involved in the Accelerator fight.”

“What?”

“My Heart Measure ability changes the distance between people’s hearts. So if I held the same distance to Accelerator as whomever he’s closest to, I might be able to force him to hesitate to attack.”

“And?”

“But that doesn’t guarantee he’ll stop when confronting the person closest to him. Some people go crazy and attack even more fiercely. *Why’d you betray me, bastard*—that kind of thing…Could you trust Accelerator on that front? I’m sorry, but I feel like no matter how I adjusted the distance between us, he’d attack me. He’s a mess, and I can’t predict what he’s going to do.”

“Huh,” answered Kakine boredly. He didn’t sound disappointed—he must not have been expecting much from the girl in terms of fighting force.

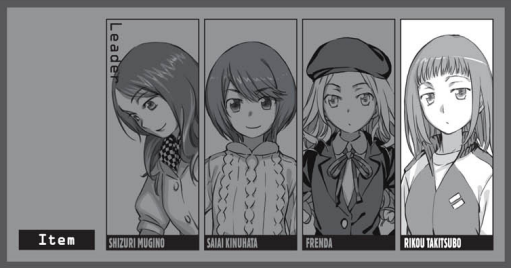
She looked at the nails on his right arm. “Once you’ve got a result, tell me. Once we have direct bargaining rights with Aleister.”

“Right,” said Kakine, before the girl in the dress left School’s hideout.

Teitoku Kakine stared at the Tweezers and grinned lethargically.

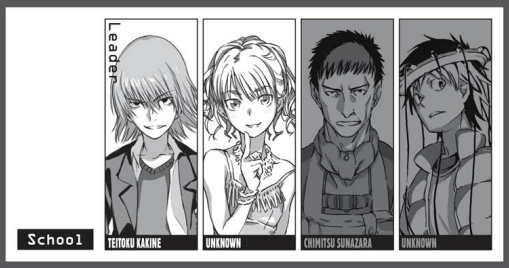
“…Accelerator, eh?”

Transmission data from "UNDER_LINE"











Transmission data from "UNDER_LINE"

CHAPTER 5

One to Overcome the Strongest Black Wings Dark_Matter.

1

With Block's eradication, the incidents had ended for the moment.

Tsuchimikado was cleaning up the mess it caused, Musujime was tending to her wounds, and who knew where Unabara was or what he was doing, though he was probably fine. Accelerator, without anything in particular to do (nor the motivation to do it), took the train back to District 7, went into the first convenience store he saw, and got a can of coffee.

Then his phone rang.

On the screen was Tsuchimikado's number, registered as "Contact 3," but when he picked up, someone else was on the other end.

"Excellent work, Accelerator. Block's attempt on the General Board chairperson's life has terminated. This is all thanks to you and Group."

"You again?" answered Accelerator, clearly annoyed.

"I'm happy to have such capable subordinates."

"…It sounds a lot like you want me to kill you."

"No, not at all. I really am grateful this time. So in addition to the stipulated payment for your normal business operations, as personal thanks, I have a useful piece of information for you."

"Useful info?"

“Yes. Information regarding a fatal threat to Serial Number 20001—Last Order.”

2

Kazari Uiharu and Last Order were at an open-air café.

Last Order was really worked up about searching for this lost child, but since they’d been walking so long, her feet hurt, and now she was slumped over the table. Uiharu, for her part, was taking on the shop’s specialty: a huge, sweetly flavored parfait.

“So what happened to the child? Did your silly hair stop reacting to him?”

“‘…Misaka doesn’t have silly hair,’ answers Misaka answers Misaka, wilting.”

Despite what she said, that one piece of hair on the top of the ten-or-so-year-old girl’s head was drifting left and right in the autumn wind. The oddly sticking-out piece of hair was certainly very silly—you probably couldn’t find a sillier one if you searched the whole world, thought Uiharu.

Misaka groaned. “‘I definitely sensed him wandering around here before, but it looks like he went somewhere in the meantime,’ says Misaka says Misaka, fed up with all the fruitless walking.”

Abruptly, the flabby Last Order’s face shot up.

Did she find him? thought Uiharu, but it looked like she was wrong:

Last Order was staring at a group of girls walking by, each with a key holder that came with meal sets at a different café chain.

“‘M-Misaka wants that, too,’ says Misaka says Misaka even though she doesn’t have a wallet so she starts making her eyes sparkle at the nice lady Uiharu!!”

“Oh, come on. Weren’t you looking for someone who got lost?”

“Mgh! Misaka senses that he’s in that café over there

—!!”

“You mustn’t be so quick to tell lies like that. Besides, I’ve only just gotten past the fresh-cream-zone prologue of this big parfait, so I couldn’t possibly leave now.”

“‘How can you be so relaxed?!’ says Misaka says Misaka, banging on the table, throwing a tantrum!!”

“Come to think of it, didn’t you get a lot of change from the taxi?”

“‘Ah!! Now that you mention it,’ says Misaka says Misaka, reaching into her pocket and grabbing a bunch of coins and dashing out of the café!!”

Before she even finished talking, she had run off. Uiharu waved a handkerchief after her, figuring she’d give her a cursory warning, saying “Be sure to come back here!”

With that, Uiharu set to work, diving into her large, sweet parfait’s ice cream zone…

“Excuse me, miss.”

…when suddenly, a voice addressed her from the side.

She put her awfully small spoon down and looked over to see a somewhat ill-bred-looking boy standing there. He had suspicious nails made of machines on his right hand.

He smiled gently, which didn’t suit his appearance.

“Yes…? Who might you be?”

“Teitoku Kakine. I’m looking for someone,” he said, handing her a photograph. “Would you happen to know where this girl went? She’s called Last Order.”

“…” For a few seconds, Uiharu stared intently at the girl in the picture.

She looked back and forth between it and Kakine several times before shaking her head. “No. *I’m sorry, but I haven’t seen her.*”

“Oh.”

“If you really can’t find her, you should probably put in a report at an Anti-Skill office.”

“Okay. I’ll try looking for her a little bit longer before that. Thanks,” said Kakine with a smile, walking away.

Uiharu stuck her slender spoon into her parfait and was about to dive back in.

“Oh, right, miss? I forgot something I wanted to say.”

“?” Before Uiharu could look up, the next words came.

“I know you were with Last Order, you fucking imbecile.”

Wham!! An impact shot through her temple.

Before she realized she’d been punched, she’d already fallen out of her chair. Her legs swung out wildly, knocking over the chair and her table. Her parfait, almost entirely uneaten, splattered all over the road like a crushed fruit.

Several nearby pedestrians screamed.

Still unable to figure out what had happened, Kakine stomped on her with his sole, holding her to the ground. “That’s why I asked that question. Not *Have you seen this girl?* but *Do you know where she went?*”

He leaned into his foot.

With a dull crack, the intense pain of bones scraping together tore through her. Her joint had popped out. It hurt so much that she wanted to writhe around, but Kakine’s iron foot wouldn’t move.

She let out not so much a cry as a scream, but Kakine’s face didn’t change in the slightest. “I’m certain you didn’t let her escape because you knew I was coming. I may be a wicked asshole, but I try my best not to get normal people wrapped up in my business. Just work with me, here, and I won’t have to resort to violence.”

The open-air café was next to a major road, and it was a holiday afternoon. There was a lot of pedestrian traffic nearby, but they’d all distanced themselves from the scene —not a one ran to Uiharu.

Which made sense.

She had a Judgment band on her arm. Judgment was really for dealing with disputes in school, and even had its fair share of elites and dropouts. But any normal student

who didn’t know much of its inner workings would simply think “anyone with an armband is part of a peacekeeping organization.” They were like the police or the self-defense force. Seeing the consummate ease with which one had been overpowered made it unthinkable for anyone to jump to her aid.

With Uiharu left high and dry, Kakine’s sole dug farther into her dislocated shoulder. “…But I don’t have mercy on my enemies. It’s one thing if you were with her by coincidence and don’t know anything, but if you’re voluntarily protecting her, that’s different. Please, miss. Don’t make me kill you.”

Crick-crack-creak!! Another wave of vicious pain hit her as her dislocated bone was manipulated even more.

By the time she decided she’d endure it, there were already tears falling from her eyes. She felt unfairness at not knowing why this was happening, fear at the overwhelming violence rendering her helpless, and frustration at her inability to break free. All the negative emotions mixed and muddled together, turning into a great pressure beginning to blossom within her very personality.

And now, purposely presented to her: a single escape route.

“Where is Last Order?”

As her consciousness flashed in pain, only Teitoku Kakine’s voice came to it.

“That’s all you need to tell me, and I’ll let you go.”

She looked back and forth, but there was no sign of an exit from this labyrinth—just a goal set up at a single point. Thrown into the darkness of violence as she was, she couldn’t help but consider giving up. Her pride as a member of Judgment and her personality as Kazari Uiharu both began to waste away under the temptation to be released from pain.

Her lips slowly moved.

As her tears fell in big drops, her mouth moved.

She couldn’t just remain silent.

Mortified at her own ungainliness, she said her last words.

“…What…?”

Teitoku Kakine’s eyebrows knotted, as though he didn’t understand.

Kazari Uiharu worked her trembling lips again.

“Did you…not hear me…?” she said with all the power she could muster. “I said she’s in a place you’ll never, ever find her. I don’t remember…telling you any lies,” she said, even sticking her tongue out at him, trying to make as much of a fool of him as she could.

Teitoku Kakine was silent for a moment.

“…All right, fine,” he said, taking his foot off Uiharu’s shoulder.

But he didn’t set it back on the ground—instead, he moved it above Uiharu’s head and stopped. “I don’t lay a hand on civilians, but like I said, I don’t have any mercy on my enemies. You knew that, and you still decided to refuse to help me. You leave me no choice.”

Teitoku Kakine’s raised foot tensed.

Then it moved, with the same casual fluidity as someone stomping on an empty can.

“This is where we say good-bye.”

A burst of wind hit her, and Uiharu shut her teary eyes. That was about the only thing she could do.

But his foot didn’t crush her head.

A new roar thundered through the city streets.

Grrushh!!

A gale kicked up. A massive one—practically a shock wave. When Uiharu opened her eyes, she saw an ATM machine shatter to pieces, its walls and glass exploding, its

fragments forming a whirlwind and zipping at Teitoku Kakine, colliding with him. The attack threw him off-balance. His foot, which he'd planned to crush her head with, had stopped on the ground mere centimeters away.

Paper bills fluttered out of the utterly demolished ATM like feathers.

And then she heard it.

"…Shit, man. Don't get so worked up over a dumb game."

The white-hot, clouded, insane, demonic voice of Academy City's strongest Level Five.

"Let's do something a little more fun. I'll give you a nice lesson in how villains are supposed to act."

3

"That hurt."

Teitoku Kakine shifted his gaze from Uiharu to Accelerator and spoke quietly.

"And it made me mad. I figured the number one would be crazy good at making me mad. Looks like I'll just have to kill you first after all."

"Hah. You're intimidating me, you chicken? *You're the one who was too scared to fight me and went looking for a handicap.* The moment you decided to go after that brat, we all knew the difference between us."

"What are you, stupid? She was insurance. Who'd ever challenge you to a fifty-fifty fight, asshole? You're such a pain. You think you're worth that much?"

Academy City's number one and number two.

Accelerator and Teitoku Kakine didn't bother to keep everything secret.

Cleanup was a job for someone else, not them.

"You swine. Your prep work done now, or what?"

"I gotta say, Underline is something. You showed up way earlier than I thought."

“Eh?”

“Don’t make me laugh, you lapdog. You think fighting for the weak like this is gonna make you a good person?”

“Hah. You don’t get it, do you?” said Accelerator quietly, tossing his cane to the side. “This is great. I’ll show you how villains come in many colors.”

Bwoom!! An explosion rang out.

Accelerator and Teitoku Kakine clashed head-on. The aftermath shock wave blazed through their surroundings equally, mowing people down, shattering glass to smithereens. In every direction, clamors broke out—but neither paid attention.

Their clash had shown clear results.

Accelerator’s attack had sent Teitoku Kakine flying back. He shot into a café on the road, and a series of cracking and breaking noises followed as he tore through furniture. Accelerator’s expression, however, was nothing if not displeased. The feeling of his punch having purposely gone awry remained in his palm.

“You control the vectors here and now,” said the voice from inside the shop, which looked like it had been bombed by terrorists. “I thought I could manage by using so much mass you didn’t have enough vectors to move it, but I guess that won’t work. I can’t do anything if you’re controlling my own vectors, too.”

Unharmed.

When Kakine came out of the store, he was wrapped in a white cocoon. No, not a cocoon—they were wings, spread on their own. Six angelic wings flapped slowly behind him.

Accelerator frowned a bit. “Those look terrible on you. What are you, from a fucking fairy tale?”

“Don’t worry, I know.”

With those words, they moved again.

Accelerator charged straight at him while manipulating the vector of his legs’ power, while Kakine made a leap to the side, wings batting the air. He shot dozens of meters

over and landed on the road's central divider; meanwhile, Accelerator swung his arm, cutting through the air and literally grabbing hold of the air flow's vector.

Roar!! A blast of wind burst forth from behind him. The air hit 120 meters per second, turning into a cannonball to knock Kakine off the divider.

"!!" Deftly moving his wings, Kakine avoided it.

And then he heard a *clack*. When he looked, he saw that Accelerator had just put a foot on the side of the road next to the divider Kakine was standing on. How had he gotten so close—when had he done that? Before he got answers, Accelerator charged into range and thrust out his right hand.

Kakine said, "Fun fact. Everything in the universe is made up of elementary particles."

As he spoke, he protected himself with a wing. When Accelerator's hand pierced it, he changed his own wing into countless feathers, preventing the impact from reaching his body.

"I'm talking about particles even smaller than molecules and atoms. Gauge particles, leptons, quarks…Even hadrons, made from antiparticles and quarks combined, but, eh—you can group them into a few things. Anyway, these are the particles that make up this world.

"However," he said in a low voice:

"My Dark Matter doesn't play by those rules."

With a loud roar of wind, six new wings grew out of Teitoku Kakine's back.

"The Dark Matter I create is something that doesn't exist anywhere in the universe. Not because we haven't found it, or because theoretically it should exist, or anything dumb like that. *It doesn't actually exist.*"

A new type of matter created by a Level Five that didn't fit into any academic categories.

His white wings ignored the laws of physics, as though he'd dragged them straight out of an alternate universe. But Accelerator wasn't shaken at all.

Whatever they were made of, he would crush all of it with his vector control ability.

"'Kay. I'll bury you with the rest of the trash."

Accelerator stepped in closer, trying to grasp at Teitoku Kakine's heart.

But…

"You don't get it, do you?"

As soon as Kakine said that, his white wings suddenly let out an intense, bright light.

"?!"

Accelerator felt a pain like he was being slowly roasted, and reflexively got away from Kakine. Then he realized the strangeness of what had just happened.

Accelerator, who reflected every vector, *had just been affected by an outside force*.

"That was diffraction. When light waves and electrons pass through a slit, the waves scatter in different directions. It's in high school textbooks. If you make more than one slit, you can make the waves interfere with one another."

Basically, his white wings had tiny gaps too small to see, and those gaps changed the nature of the sunlight coming through them and attacked him…or so Accelerator figured. His wings hadn't made light—they'd altered the light passing through them.

"Yeah, like everything, it all depends on how you use it. How's it feel to die from a sunburn?"

But…

"…Looks like you flunked physics, moron. Use diffraction all you want—you can't change sunlight into a death beam."

"Maybe not, if I was obeying this universe's physics."

Kakine began to boost his wings with power as though drawing back a bowstring.

"But my Dark Matter is a new kind of matter that doesn't

exist in this universe. Our existing laws of physics don't apply to it. Any sunlight that touches the Dark Matter and reflects off it starts working on independent laws. It's called a foreign substance for a reason. A tiny bit of it and the world changes completely."

Zhaa!! The six wings flapped. They stirred up a gale, and as Accelerator buffeted it with his reflection, he realized what Kakine was after. He looked right at him to see him smiling thinly.

"…I'm done reverse-engineering it."

"!!"

Accelerator tried to get out of the way, but Kakine had already unleashed his six wings: as simple blunt killing instruments.

Crack, thud, crush!! Dull sounds ripped through Accelerator's innards.

His body, reflecting every vector, was blown away. He crashed into a tree over ten meters away, breaking its thick trunk in one go.

"Guh, pah…?!"

The sunlight, the gale…their meaning…!!

"Accelerator, you say you reflect everything, but that's not quite accurate."

Kakine's wings silently extended.

They looked like giant swords now, over twenty meters long. Accelerator jumped over a building top, but the wings, positioned vertically, struck him like a crumbling tower.

"If you reflect sound, you can't hear anything. If you reflect matter, you can't hold anything. You unconsciously filter out the harmful from the beneficial, and you only reflect what you don't need."

As Accelerator coughed up blood, he jumped to the side, breaking through the remains of a water storage tank.

The white wings swung down, ripping through the building from its roof to midway through, spreading dust everywhere.

“My Dark Matter affected that sunlight and wind just now. I injected them with twenty-five thousand vectors each. After that, your reflection used its good-bad filter—I just had to attack from the direction of a vector you’re unconsciously letting through.”

Even if Accelerator changed his reflection’s composition, Kakine would redo his search in an instant. It would trap him in a vicious cycle. He’d just accumulate damage while switching between attack and defense.

“This is Dark Matter,” grinned Teitoku Kakine, holding his six wings at the ready. “A space filled with a foreign substance. A space you don’t know shit about.”

Meanwhile, Accelerator manipulated the air to cause four tornadoes around him.

And then he charged.

His tornadoes wrenched Kakine’s white wings away, and Kakine’s white wings, along with their gales, erased Accelerator’s tornadoes. By the time the reinforced concrete structure began to creak and sway unreliably from the aftermath, the two were no longer there. They were moving parallel to each other, crashing their abilities together, sometimes jumping onto wind turbine propellers and sometimes leaping off traffic lights, dashing at an intense speed through the city streets.





“I invented a bunch of schemes—stealing the Tweezers, taking a look into the Underline—but none worked,” shouted Kakine as he swung his dozen-meter-long wings around. “Looks like killing your number-one ass is the fastest route after all!!”

“What’s that, small fry? Didn’t know you still had such a complex about being number two!!”

“It’s not about that. I just wanted direct bargaining rights with Aleister!!”

Accelerator ignored him and purposely crashed down onto the asphalt below. The impact caused pebbles to pop into the air; he flung out a hard, two-stage kick at them.

A tremendous roaring noise split the air.

The pebbles, their vectors altered, flew out faster than a Railgun shot, but disintegrated just four or five centimeters later. But the shock wave remained; the speed had already broken the sound barrier. However, Kakine, putting all his strength into his white wings, used them to disperse it. Their respective waves clashed between them, and the resulting surge of air ripped signboards and traffic lights from their fixtures.

“That shithead Aleister has a bunch of plans going at once. Seems like they’re his highest priority. But even if you stop his crazy plans, he’ll switch to some alternative scheme, then go back to the original plan. Terrible guy. It’s like a game of Amidakuji—he goes to a different line for a bit, but he ends up right back on the track where he started.”

Accelerator and Teitoku Kakine, who’d been running parallel, now made sharp turns, running at each other to clash at point-blank range. They were at a giant scrambled intersection, with four lanes on each side. Their clash completely cut off the flow of traffic, but nobody was complaining. Nobody *could* complain. Everyone instinctively knew that secrecy wasn’t the issue here—if they said something, they’d die.

The two bodies crossed.

Air exploded, and after a few seconds, a *zbaaahhh* rattled through it.

“Which makes things simple. Just smash all his backup plans, and he won’t be able to compromise by going to a different line. And if I set myself up as the real core of it, rather than just a spare plan, Aleister can’t ignore me. It’s not like I want to destroy Academy City. I can use it. That’s why I’ll worm my way into the middle and get it all in the palm of my hand!!”

Blood flew from both Accelerator and Teitoku Kakine.

“Right. If you kill the current ‘core’ now, you’ll take over his plans.”

They stopped, then slowly turned around to face each other.

Teitoku Kakine was probably confident, beyond his big talk, that he could get accurate information on just how many plans Aleister had running at the same time.

And Teitoku Kakine had a reason, something making him go that far. Accelerator didn’t think too much about that point. Wander into Academy City’s underbelly and you’d realize tragedies were as numerous as hills and stars. Teitoku Kakine had probably experienced one and broken. Just like how Accelerator had killed over ten thousand people for the experiment. And how he had thrown away his life for the sake of one person.

“Worthless,” he said, having predicted that. “Maybe you’re trying to give me sound arguments like you’re some perfect person, but it’s still all shit coming out of a filthy mouth.”

“Hah. You don’t have the right to tell me off when you don’t even know how valuable your own position is. You’re the closest to having direct bargaining rights with Aleister.”

“That’s all you had to say to prove what a cheap villain you are,” said Accelerator in disappointment from the wrecked intersection. “You can use a tragedy a bunch of

ways. You can carry it with you, you can tell others about it, and you can use it to decide what direction to take your life in. But just because it happens doesn't make it right for you to go after totally unrelated little brats, got it? The moment you start to think your grand cause makes it okay for you to kill civilians, you've cheapened yourself as a villain."

"Right, sure. That means a lot, coming from you," replied Teitoku Kakine, sounding uninterested. He went on, "I'm not going after civilians because I like it or something. If I'm in a good mood, I'll even let lower villains go free. But not if it's a threat to my life. How many random onlookers and pedestrians have you crushed in this battle so far? You just sent pieces of asphalt flying faster than the speed of sound. The shock wave leveled everything. It was our battle."

"…"

"That's why I went after Last Order—and that brat who looked like her guardian. Don't lecture me from on high, murderer. You've got no right to tell me shit when you've let those onlookers die just to kill me. You think you're an exception or something?"

"Hah. Let onlookers die just to kill you, eh?" But Accelerator, denounced, laughed. "You really are third-rate. You don't have the *aesthetic*, and that's why you can only spout bullshit like that."

"Eh?"

"Do you even know why I'm number one and you're number two?"

Laughing, Accelerator slowly spread his hands.

"It's because there's a wall between us you can never get past."

Teitoku Kakine felt his head nearly explode with anger, but then he noticed something.

What it was like around them.

True, Accelerator and Dark Matter's clash had messed

up the city streets. High-rise building windows had been shattered, broken traffic lights were strewn about the roads, and roadside trees had been whipped around so hard they were now stuck in concrete walls.

But something was missing.

The tragedy.

Despite the glass fragments pouring down like rain, nobody was injured. The raging winds had diverted their course and the signboards had shielded people late to escape, miraculously protecting the crowds. The rest was the same. Not a single person hurt. He couldn't check every single one, but he knew if he went back along the course of their battle, there would be many who had been defended by invisible hands.

*Are…are you…*Kakine's throat dried up.

"Are you telling me you protected them…?"

He thought back to the first shots. Accelerator had fired a gale at Teitoku Kakine, but he could have done a more powerful surprise attack as well. But if he had, the aftermath would have blown away Last Order's acquaintance, but…

In short, that was his way of life.

Even embroiled in a Level Five death match, number one in the city vs. number two, even though the slightest diversion of his attention would have created a fatal opening, Accelerator had continued to protect innocent people.

"You've…gotta be shitting me. How much can you fucking control?"

Accelerator looked bored. He just grinned scornfully, as if this much was only natural—why couldn't Teitoku Kakine do it?

"*You angry now, small-timer?*" said Accelerator, as though this were all absurd, to Teitoku Kakine, awash with shock. *"This is a true villain."*

Even after all that, he was still a villain. How amazing did

good people have to be in his mind?

"!! Don't get full of yourself, Acceleratoooooorrrrrrr!!"

With a shout, Teitoku Kakine's six wings immediately swelled with power. He changed their length, then their-properties—until the white wings spread out as lethal weapons. They were tense as a fully drawn bowstring, and their sights were set perfectly on six of Accelerator's vital points.

Accelerator just laughed. "Come on."

"Don't get complacent. I've already analyzed your reflection's filter. That fraud of a defensive power won't work on these."

"Yeah, maybe this Dark Matter you control doesn't exist in this universe," said Accelerator, beckoning with his index finger. "Textbook laws don't apply, and light waves and EM waves that touch those elementary particles go off in vectors they're not supposed to. So yeah, I guess trying to use this universe's vector calculations for it ends up putting holes in my armor."

The bloodlust between them expanded.

The center of the busy intersection was covered up with death.

"I'll just have to redo my calculations to include it. I'll redefine the universe so that it's constructed of particles including your Dark Matter, and then, once I officially unveil your 'new world' to the public, it'll be checkmate."

"You think…you can use your vector control on my Dark Matter…?"

"You think I can't?"

"Hah. You think you've got me all figured out, do you?"

"Wouldn't be much of an issue."

"…!!"

"And sorry, but I don't need to know everything about you anyway."

There was an explosive *ga-bam!!*

They crossed for an instant.

And thus, the match between number one and number two was settled.

4

Accelerator looked toward the ground. His crutch was there. It was probably one of the things that came flying from the direction of the onlookers as a side effect of the battle. He picked it up and returned his choker electrode's switch to normal mode. A moment later, it sounded like the noise from around the busy intersection had gotten closer. About a hundred, a hundred fifty witnesses. But he wasn't about to try to hide any of this. That was for the underlings to do. It was too trivial for him to worry about.

"…" He turned around.

Teitoku Kakine was lying on his face in the middle of the intricate intersection—the vectors of the white wings he'd created had been predicted, their control wrested from him, and then his body skewered. Red blood spread out in the middle of the intersection like some strange magic circle.

But Dark Matter still wasn't dead.

And Accelerator wasn't a good guy—he was a villain.

That detestable "good guy" probably wouldn't finish him off right now. He'd just pick up and leave. He might even meddle in the villain's affairs and leave him away to get back on his feet. But Accelerator instead pulled the gun from his belt. The option of letting Teitoku Kakine go, when he'd chosen to use Last Order and civilians as his weakness to defeat Accelerator, didn't cross his mind. *Guess that's the difference between a good guy and a villain*, he thought distractedly.

"See you, third-rate," he muttered to the unconscious Kakine, flicking up the hammer on his gun with his thumb. "Less pathetic than a good guy taking you down anyway."

He rested his index finger on the trigger. This was the

end. He wouldn’t rely on man’s goodwill or God’s miracles—his was the path of evil, a future created simply as a result of his actions. Intending to live his own way, he lined up the barrel with his enemy’s head and began to put one last bit of energy into his right hand.

About to accomplish everything, with a peace built upon death just moments away…

“Wait up, there, Accelerator!!”

A loud, out-of-sight voice interrupted him. He looked over as a familiar face jumped out from the wall of curious onlookers. One wearing an unbelievably unstylish green jersey and no makeup. She was both a school teacher and a member of the peacekeeping organization Anti-Skill.

Aiho Yomikawa.

She ran straight over to him.

“I don’t know where you’ve been this whole time. I couldn’t tell you what any of this means. But I can say one-thing—give me that gun. You don’t need something like that!!”

Yomikawa wasn’t carrying one. She wasn’t even carrying the bare minimum for self-defense, like those distinct batons or stun guns. The onlookers nearby must have thought she was an idiot. That it was an act of suicide to go up to an out-of-control esper, one who had just committed so much havoc unarmed.

Yomikawa probably understood the dangers just fine.

In fact, as a front-line Anti-Skill officer, she knew it a lot better than those onlookers.

“I’m a villain.”

“Then I’ll stop you.”

“Are you serious?”

“Stopping you is the only choice I know.”

She said *stop*, not *defeat* or *kill*. That was how she did things. Just as Accelerator had chosen the life of a villain,

Aiho Yomikawa would never agree to point a weapon at a child she should be protecting. Accelerator stared right into her eyes. The strength of her will was in them. From his point of view, the compass she used to decide her actions was nonsensical. She'd probably found enough value in this to be worth giving up her life for.

"Accelerator, it doesn't matter if you're a good guy or a bad guy. It doesn't matter what kind of world you're immersed in, either. What matters is me bringing you back, 'kay? However dark your world, however deep it runs, I will never give up on you. I promise you that I will pull you out of there."

At that moment, the two were on a level playing field. He was Academy City's strongest Level Five, and she was an adult with no power whatsoever—but all that belonged in a different dimension now as Aiho Yomikawa stood in his way.

"That's why I'll stand in your way. I do it for the children I need to protect, and for this peace we love. In that, I see you and Last Order there, and everyone living happily. You won't need that gun in that future."

"…" Accelerator, for a little while, stayed silent and listened to her words.

And then he came to a conclusion.

He turned his gun, aimed at Kakine, and pointed it at Yomikawa.

That's why…

Aiho Yomikawa was an enemy. Even if she was a "good guy," even if the reason for her actions was so Accelerator could be happy, she was obstructing the path of evil he needed to dominate. So he would get rid of her. Not kill her. He was good enough with a gun to go easy on her.

…right here…

Accelerator had people he needed to protect. Last Order, the Sisters, Kikyou Yoshikawa, and Aiho Yomikawa. That was why he would stick to his cruel nature. Even if the whole world, *even if the people he needed to protect turned*

into enemies, he was determined to save those people from the darkness.

…I'll shoot her!!

"You can't."

The next thing he knew, Aiho Yomikawa was close to him, gently holding Accelerator's gun-wielding hand in hers.

"I know you're a better villain than that."

The match was decided. Yomikawa began to take each of Accelerator's fingers off the gun. She took the magazine out from under the grip, pulled the slide, and removed the bullets already loaded, too. Accelerator watched in a daze as she finished the job.

And then…

Crash!!

Teitoku Kakine's Dark Matter attacked, putting an end to Accelerator's train of thought.

He hadn't been the target.

Aiho Yomikawa's eyes opened wide with shock. Then she slowly looked down at herself. The tip of one of those unknown white wings was sticking through her gut like a sword. Her green jersey was stained red with blood. Already red, and it didn't take much time for it to start spreading terribly fast.

Yomikawa tried to say something. But her body wavered, and she fell to the asphalt without resistance. Accelerator watched. Beyond where Aiho Yomikawa fell was a single figure. It was Teitoku Kakine, who should have been unconscious.

On his back were six wings.

What had happened didn't bear any explanation.

Slllp. The sharp feather thrust through the woman quickly removed itself.

"…However dark your world, however deep it runs, I promise you that I'll pull you out of there, eh…"

Teitoku Kakine, face covered in blood, was saying something.

He hadn't gone after Yomikawa because she was in the way; Kakine had only ever been watching Accelerator. It was that slight moment of hesitation when, before Yomikawa, he'd been about to stop the *evil*. The act that would have withdrawn his very reason for killing Teitoku Kakine. *That* was what was in the way.

Now he barely knew why he'd even lost.

And that was why Teitoku Kakine flew into a rage.

"You could never do that. It would never be that easy! This is our world. This is where the darkness and the despair lead!! You were condescending to me before, and at the very end, you still cling to it…Is this the fucking *aesthetic* you were talking about?!"

Incoherent words. His anger and malice came first, and what resulted were words that had lost logic and consistency. They were just shock waves slamming into Accelerator's body.

"In the end, you're the same as I am. You can't protect anyone. And a lot more people will die after this, too. Killed by people like me. Isn't that right, Accelerator?! You only got this far after making a lot of fucking people die!!"

Teitoku Kakine unsteadily dragged his blood-covered body to its feet.

Not to bare his fangs at Accelerator. Accelerator could-tell—he knew malice personally. Kakine's was directed somewhere else.

Namely, to Aiho Yomikawa, crumpled on the ground.

"St…op."

"I can't hear you!"

He identified a grinding noise. He didn't know what had happened. Kakine hadn't touched Yomikawa, but something invisible trampled over her. Her body twitched. The dark red on her, under pressure, started to expand a lot more quickly.

“Stop!!”

“I said I can’t fucking hear you!!”

Kakine’s roar drowned out Accelerator’s words.

“Don’t let that bitch decide things, idiot! Why the fuck are you trying to resolve things through talking, villain?! That’s not what we are. That’s not how we do things and you know it!!”

Kakine’s ability further increased in pressure.

Now, not only her side but her mouth began to drip with viscous red fluid.

“If you want someone to stop moving, just kill them. If you don’t like something, just break it. That’s what it means to be evil! Don’t start wanting to be saved!! Don’t start trying to laugh it off like an idiot!! There’s no way a dumbass like you would ever be given that!! Come on, show me. Show me that evil you were lecturing me about before like some kind of fucking god!!”

——*Idiot*, he spat.

He said he wouldn’t get civilians and pedestrians involved in the battle, and look what had happened. He’d abandoned the path of light, he’d decided to rule from the pinnacle of darkness, and he almost took the hand extended to him, fooled by warm words. He almost looked away from the dark world he was in, just for a moment, and almost touched the world of light. As a result, he lost sight of his top priority—removing the threat of Teitoku Kakine as soon as he could—and it gave way to a tragedy he could have prevented.

Therefore…

This time, Accelerator would become altogether evil.

He swore then and there to rend Teitoku Kakine to pieces, no matter what he lost.

He felt like his right and left brain had split. And he definitely felt like something sharp, something with an

edge, had come up out of it and stabbed the inside of his skull. It wedged itself into his brain, that something, and immediately swallowed up Accelerator. He heard a squish, like a fruit being crushed. Something like tears flowed from his eyes. But they weren't tears. This fluid was darker, redder, dirtier, more uncomfortable, and smelled like iron. Anything spilling from his lachrymal glands was now only hatred.

And with it brought…

a loss of control.

"Oo…"

He heard a pillar supporting his identity break. A thick, syrupy emotion washed over everything, from his center to his extremities. He clenched his teeth, his eyes turned red, and Accelerator let loose a howl that could be heard to the ends of the earth.

"Ooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh hhh!!"

His back burst open. From it burst murky black wings. Black wings like jet sprays. The anger had removed his very consciousness, crushed his very sense of self, and the pair of wings had exploded out of it. In moments, they stretched dozens of meters, parted the asphalt, and scraped against building walls.

"Ha…"

When Teitoku Kakine saw that, he knew.

His Dark Matter, his elementary particles that supposedly didn't exist in this universe. What on earth was it? Where was he pulling it out of? What did it mean?

"Crazy…That's some crazy evil. See, you can do it after all, villain. I see why Dark Matter's just a spare plan now. But that doesn't necessarily mean victory is assured!!"

As though answering his cry, Teitoku Kakine's six wings exploded out. They reached dozens of meters in length, filled with both a mystical light and an inorganic, machinelike quality. Just like a giant weapon that God or

angels would use.



Bawoo!! cried the air touched by the six wings.

What Accelerator and Dark Matter possessed, respectively, were organicity and inorganicity. And those terms applied to a different world than this one. One wielded a part of a power equal to God, and one wielded part of the heavenly plane in which God lived. With these conditions, the match was even. And Teitoku Kakine, unlike Accelerator, hadn't lost himself.

Power the likes of which he'd never felt before raged within him.

And he felt like he had perfect control over every last bit of it.

Kakine thought to himself that their number one and number two positions had just reversed. It wasn't an empty act of courage, nor was it him being a sore loser. It had none of the dramatization the emotion did. It was a simple impression. Right now, even against all the armies in the world, even against all the espers in Academy City at once, he could beat them without a scratch. Those were his honest thoughts.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!! *Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!*"

Laughing and laughing some more, Kakine took his six truly awakened wings and slammed them into Accelerator.

He didn't even care about Accelerator anymore. He just wanted to test this on something nearby. That was all Kakine was thinking.

But then, a *crack*.

A moment later, his body, hit with a massive force, was buried in the asphalt.

"Guh…?!"

He didn't know what had happened.

Accelerator's black wings hadn't moved. He'd simply looked his way and waved a hand. With just that, Kakine, who thought he was in an absolutely dominant position,

lost, crushed deep down into the ground.

He heard cricking and cracking.

It was his right hand, with the Tweezers equipped, being instantly cut off at the elbow.

Gah…ah…!! Wh-what the…hell…?!

Accelerator had picked up some kind of vector, changed its direction, concentrated it at one point, and attacked him with it. He knew that, but even with all the world's vectors, he couldn't have caused something like this. Right now, Teitoku Kakine was sure he couldn't lose in this world.

It didn't make sense.

He couldn't comprehend it.

The supremely overwhelming Accelerator simply walked toward him, slowly, one step at a time, toward where he was smashed. Kakine realized that every footfall was his life ticking away. When the distance came to zero, his life would end. And Accelerator had already taken the final step.

"Ha-ha…"

"…yjrpevilqw"

"Damn it…So that's it!! That's what you were for?!"

No response—just a lethal fist coming down on him.

The overwhelming butchery had begun.

5

Only the sounds of pounding meat echoed through Academy City. With each hit, the asphalt cracked, the earth rumbled like an aftershock, and the buildings shook ominously. None of the onlookers could say a word. Even looking away took courage. Most people did nothing but gaze at the overpowering scene.

"Ugh…"

Amidst all that, Aiho Yomikawa woke up.

In the haze in her mind, she heard a roar. A roar more fearsome than a beast's and more horrible than a demon's. But to Yomikawa, it sounded like a child crying.

I have to stop him, she thought in spite of herself.

“Yomikawa!!”

But before the collapsed Yomikawa could move, someone grabbed her arm. They picked her up, got under her shoulder, and swiftly moved away from the site of the incident. The deftness belonged to another Anti-Skill officer. But unlike Yomikawa’s jersey, this one was fully armed with a gun and body armor.

“…Urgh…Saigou? Let me go…I still have to…!!”

“You can’t, Yomikawa!!”

She tried to fling him away, but she didn’t have her normal strength. Meanwhile, she heard a series of bangs and booms, the air being struck. She looked up and saw a black combat helicopter soaring through the blue sky. It was one of the brand-new Hexawings.

“The satellites just came online again temporarily, and they detected an abnormality. A distortion the law of relativity can’t explain has expanded over one hundred meters around us. The analysis team says it’s probably bizarre interference from involuntary diffusion fields.”

“And you’re attacking the source, even though it might kill you? Give me a break!!”

She coughed up blood when she shouted, but this time, she wrested herself free from Saigou’s arm. She took another look around. Many other fully armed officers were here, and they even had units of powered suits and armored cars. It was like a scene out of a nightmare. For Yomikawa, who had investigated Accelerator’s earlier years to some degree, it gave her a sense of déjà vu. He’d been surrounded like this once when he was younger, and he’d surrendered, having lost any hope at life—and then they threw him into a dark research facility.

She couldn’t let that happen again.

Not paying any mind to the wound in her side, the blood-soaked Yomikawa stood in the officers’ way.

“Lower your guns!! We don’t need them to persuade

Accelerator!!”

“But Yomikawa!!”

“Don’t you know who that is? That’s a child we’re supposed to protect! I won’t accept it. I’ll never allow anyone to point a weapon at him!!”

That was when Accelerator looked up to the skies.

His black wings began spurting out with even more force.

“Ooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Ba-boom!! An impact shot through everyone present.

It wasn’t a physical one; it was a simple threat to their lives. Their animalistic instincts had gripped and squeezed their hearts. The pressure she felt was so strong it felt like she’d crumple to the ground if she relaxed. Accelerator’s anger wasn’t directed at the onlookers or the officers; they were below his attention. Nevertheless, with just the scrap of that emotion, he dominated the world, forced it to yield to him, and nearly destroyed it.

Accelerator was supposed to be after Teitoku Kakine.

But who would believe, looking at him now, that he’d stop there? Once his target was gone, and his anger had nowhere left to go, would he point it somewhere else? Nobody there let that possibility—no, that danger—go unconsidered. Yomikawa knew Accelerator well—and she knew his actions were too hard to predict.

Damn. Can’t I…do anything…?

When Yomikawa tried to get closer to him, she coughed up blood. Saigou frantically pinioned her, stopping her from moving. Even restrained, however, she watched Accelerator through blurred eyes, thinking, *Isn’t there some way to stop him? Is…is this stupid nonsense really going to end his future?!*

He let out another roar, painting over the world with black. The black wings on his back granted despair beyond the realm of man. She saw some Anti-Skill officers get their

guns ready out of reflex, without being ordered. But if they pulled the trigger, it would all be over. The act would be tantamount to rejection from society, and it would break him again. And she wasn't sure anyone would be able to bring him back a second time.

Faced with such overwhelming power, everyone had lost hope.

All they could do was cringe out of the way of that power's rampage and tremble.

And then, before their eyes…

…their last hope came down to them.

It looked like a ten-year-old girl. Shoulder-length brown hair and energetic features. Clothed in a sky-blue camisole with a baggy men's button-down over it, their "hope" pushed terror-stricken onlookers out of the way as best she could and came to the busy intersection.

She said she was looking for someone lost.

Now that she'd found him, she didn't hesitate. Even with the overpowering scene spread out before her, she went straight up to Accelerator. Everyone who saw her thought it was over—but none could reach out to stop her, either. She'd already gotten too close to the destruction's center point.

"'I found you,' says Misaka says Misaka, relaxed."

She approached Accelerator's back as he continued to howl.

Accelerator slowly turned around.

Vwooh!! A burst of roaring wind.

Academy City's strongest Level Five had just done something very simple: His jetlike black wings had sliced through the air. His backward-facing wings were packed with incredible power, and he'd inadvertantly let loose a massive yet casual attack.

Everyone there visualized the tragedy.

They imagined her young body torn apart, crushed, and scattered across the road.

But…

With a tremendous *gkkkeeee*, the black wings stopped right in front of Last Order.

An invisible wall had blocked Accelerator's attack. It was just a few centimeters from her face, and though his wings trembled and shook, they didn't get any closer. The girl shouldn't have had any abilities that could ward off his black wings. Even if someone searched the whole world, they might not find anyone like that.

If she couldn't do it, and if nobody in the world could do it, then who had stopped them, and how?

As Yomikawa stared in stupefaction, she eventually came to an answer.

"Accelerator…"

Academy City's strongest Level Five. The One-Way Road. If anyone could stop this overwhelming power that nobody could reach, it would have to be the man creating that power himself. At the very end of the end of the critical moment, Accelerator had stopped his wings.

The black wings trembled, squealing and cracking.

They trembled like the sobbing of a beast.

And then the *bang* of gunpowder rang out.

Yomikawa, startled, looked over to see that one of the Anti-Skill officers had just discharged his gun.

Shit, she thought.

He'd fired at Accelerator with Last Order nearby. His black wings had torn apart and transformed into several sharp feathers. They were aimed at the Anti-Skill officers nearby. He had taken it as an attack against the girl.

Accelerator unleashed a booming attack right away, with himself at the center, but…

"'Stop,' advises Misaka advises Misaka."

One word from Last Order.

As soon as it came out, the feather tips at the Anti-Skill officers' throats stopped dead in their tracks.

"'It'll be all right,' says Misaka says Misaka, extending her hand."

It wasn't that the little girl didn't understand the situation. She knew how dangerous Accelerator was, but she still reached out to him with a delicate hand.

"'You don't have to do this anymore,' says Misaka says Misaka, telling you what the right thing is."

As if to swat away her words, Accelerator crashed his black wings into her again.

But once again, they stopped centimeters before her face. A sharp *ggkkkeeee* was the only sound that came out. It was Accelerator's internal conflict. His heart was telling him to get rid of her. If it meant feeling like this, if it meant tragedies repeating, he should abandon everything. But he just couldn't do it. He could kill her at the twitch of a finger. It would be so easy to send that tiny body flying. But no matter what he did, he couldn't let go of that hope.

"Aaahhhhhhhhhhhh!! Gaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

He burst into a roar.

For a few moments, the only sound was the angry flapping of his black wings.

But the overwhelming sense of pressure they'd been exerting was gone. Now he seemed like a young child throwing a tantrum. The girl watched. When those next attacks came, she didn't even shut her eyes. She trusted-him—so she wasn't surprised.

He swung his wings much wider, then brought them down at her in one final, determined attack.

When they stopped dead in front of her face, Accelerator stopped as well.

His head was down—nobody could see his face.

Without a sound, the pair of wings on his back melted into the air and vanished. At the same time, all the strength

left his body. She spread her arms to accept him. He wavered, then slowly fell toward her.

Accelerator's weight seemed like it would crush her, but she held onto him anyway.

She brought her mouth to his ear and whispered into it.

"'That's good,' says Misaka says Misaka."

EPILOGUE

To the Survivors Go the Spoils

Nano_Size_Data.

When he came to, Accelerator was riding in an ambulance.

But the machines inside it weren't the same as an actual ambulance. This one probably wasn't heading for a hospital. He was being brought somewhere else.

Someone must have been driving it, but he couldn't see them. Nobody else was riding with him, either. His cell phone was on the floor beside him. When Accelerator noticed it, his ringtone went off, as though somebody was keeping a close eye on him.

Accelerator picked it up and heard a voice that was familiar, in a way.

"It looks like you overdid it this time."

"…You again? None of you could do shit. You all just watched from on high. You don't have the right to lecture me. The only one who can act high and mighty is the one who *actually* risked her life to stop me."

"You understand."

"Shit," spat Accelerator bitterly at the voice on the telephone that wasn't listening. *"Yeah, I get it."*

"Anyway, I was the one who gave you the information regarding Teitoku Kakine, so I can't be too hard on you. I would like you to be more efficient in utilizing my information, that's all."

"What's the penalty?"

“What should it be, indeed. I could increase your debt, but for you, that wouldn’t be much of a punishment. And you’re too important to get rid of. Yes, what shall *I do?”*

Those words were filled with implication. It got on Accelerator’s nerves, but the telephone voice abruptly said, “*By the way, do you really plan on going back?*”

“Eh?”

“I ask out of simple interest. After falling so far, declaring that you’d stand at the top of the darkness— Will you still not give up on that warmth?”

“*Do you even have to ask?*” he spat back.

“I see.”

“Not gonna stop me?”

“I’ll at least give you the right to struggle. Not necessarily the right to succeed, though.”

“Perfect,” said Accelerator, hanging up.

He stared at the screen for a few moments, but eventually put it in his pocket, opened the window hidden behind the curtains, and looked out at the scenery.

…Oh.

He still felt that little girl’s warmth in his arms.

He clenched his fist and tried to will the sensation away, quietly thinking, *I’ll outwit them for sure. Academy City, those shitheads at the top—everyone.*

In his inside pocket was a USB drive with his choker electrode’s blueprints.

He’d checked it between operations, but it was no simple device. Just to make one part needed two or three ingredients or devices, and to make them he’d need four or five pieces of equipment—and those were all made by the-frog-faced doctor himself. He felt like he was looking at Princess Kaguya’s impossible tasks. It looked like it would take considerable time to break down the electrode, remove the useless parts, and make a copy of it.

But Accelerator still swore he’d do it as he hid that little hint he’d finally gotten in his pocket.

Mitsuki Unabara left through the hospital's front entrance.

Xóchitl had come here as an assassin from the organization. She'd probably hate this ending. Unable to accomplish her goal or to even meet her end through death, he had let her live, only to steal her strongest weapon, the original copy of her grimoire. All she could feel right then was suffering.

But she was still alive.

Even with less than a third of her original body left, and though what remained was not much more than a simulacrum wrapped in skin, she still had life. Unabara was happy for it. It may have been pure self-satisfaction, but for Mitsuki Unabara, it was a kind of salvation.

"Urgh…"

His consciousness swayed.

Taking in the grimoire meant immense knowledge was now stored in his mind. But it wasn't used to a human body. It felt like iron fragments scraping through the wrinkles on his brain, strong enough to shoot through him from head to toe if he let it.

I must have lost too much blood…

Mitsuki Unabara reached into his inside pocket.

His hand came out with the original copy, which he'd separated from Xóchitl. An extremely long grimoire in the form of a scroll, made out of animal skin. He unrolled the meters' worth of knowledge and cast his eye over the contents.

Gradually, the pain decreased.

Once it was completely gone, he would understand this "original copy."

Ha-ha. If the English Puritan Church found me, they'd get rid of me, no questions asked.

But this grimoire had power.

And at the moment, he desperately needed power.

…I was so intent on staying hidden in Academy City's underworld.

He rolled the scroll back up neatly, then put it back into his inside pocket.

What's happening with the organization right now? Why did a nice girl like Xóchitl transform into an assassin? …I'm going to have to confront the organization again.

With a new power in hand, he looked forward.

Unable to look too deep into the dark—but the Aztecan sorcerer didn't hesitate.

From afar, Awaki Musujime stared at the juvenile reformatory as dark smoke rose from it.

A bandage-like thing was wrapped around her bloody foot. It was an organic artificial skin that used corn fibers. It still felt strange to her, but eventually it would fuse with her—thanks to the regenerative capabilities of flesh—and create such natural "human skin" that it wouldn't leave any marks.

"…"

Without looking at her painful wounds, she kept her gaze fixed on the reformatory.

She thought becoming a playing piece for Academy City's underworld had guaranteed her allies' safety. But when push came to shove and the reformatory fell under attack, the city hadn't even sent in Anti-Skill reinforcements—even though they had those brand-new HsAFH-11 attack helicopters out and ready by the time the mercenaries scaled Academy City's wall.

I figured there would be a limit to how much I could trust those people.

Nevertheless, she couldn't immediately start waving a flag of rebellion. "Those people" were the ones with all the real power in Academy City. Even if she liberated her allies from that juvenile reformatory's special block, they'd have nowhere to run. Not too long ago, she'd put down another-

back-alley group, Skill-Out. If she let her allies escape haphazardly, a similar end would be waiting for them. “Those people” could have even assigned her that mission to let her know that.

Still…

I swear I’ll get them back for this.

Musujime promised herself. She decided to hold tight to the truth of that day, and the emotion that had begun to sprout from it. The phase of her relying on other people or other things she’d never seen or met before to protect her allies was over. Going forward, she would only believe what she saw with her own eyes and felt with her own hands, and use that to build up a protective wall.

She cast one last gaze in the reformatory’s direction, then turned her back to it.

She left without a sound, thinking to herself.

I’ll rescue them from that place, for sure.

And so, at an unspecified time, in an unspecified place, Accelerator, Motoharu Tsuchimikado, Mitsuki Unabara, and Awaki Musujime gathered back together.

Tsuchimikado had a machine glove on his hand. His index finger and middle finger each had a long, glass nail attached to it. The bloodstained tool was the exact one Kakine had been in possession of.

It was called the Tweezers.

Accelerator looked at it and sighed. “Slipped in during the chaos and snatched it, huh? Surprised you were hiding with the rubberneckers.”

“Apparently, nanodevices called the Underline are inside this. It looks like the reason for School’s actions was to collect them from the air and analyze them.”

Accelerator wondered how he knew all that, but decided he’d probably been scurrying around without him knowing.

Then Unabara, who didn’t look very good, asked a question, his speech slower than usual. “What data do they

contain?”

“The Underline is the core of Aleister’s direct information network in Academy City. The stuff inside the nanomachines is on a different level than the city data banks.”

Now that he mentioned it, when Accelerator had attacked a General Board member named Thomas Platinaburg in his mansion some time ago, he’d tried to steal data from him. He could only get so much at the time—maybe he was splitting up information based on its secrecy between the regular network and the special one that used the Underline.

Musujime, with a bored look, said, “Sounds like work. What kind of info is in those nanomachines anyway?”

“One second. We’re about to find out.”

The small monitor on the back of the Tweezers’ gloves made a blip. A jumble of random-looking characters scrolled by quickly—results of the analysis—and after that, began to change into actual words and sentences.

“Looks like a bunch of secret codes for the Academy City underworld.”

“You think it’ll give us a hint on how to get out of this?”

“The names here are…Group, School, Item, Member, Block…This one is Tweezers…Here’s the *Altair II*’s data and a rough map of the juvenile reformatory…”

“What do you mean secret codes?” said Musujime. “Sounds better than it actually is. Doesn’t this just mean the higher-ups were keeping an eye on Group and gathering information? Why show us this data now?”

“There’s one more,” said Tsuchimikado.

All of Group looked at the Tweezers’ screen. Tsuchimikado had set it apart from the others, and they took that to mean it was some different information.

Newly acquired intel.

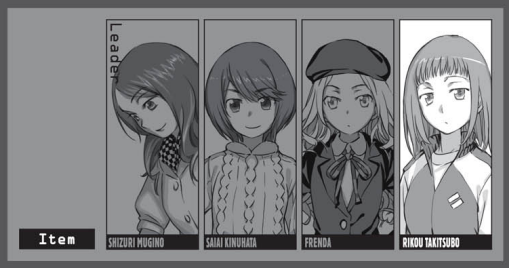
Motoharu Tsuchimikado read aloud the characters displayed there.

“The last one here…is ‘Dragon.’”

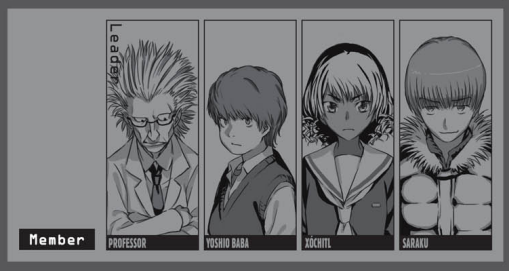
At the end of the battles, they’d gotten an all-too-tiny opening.

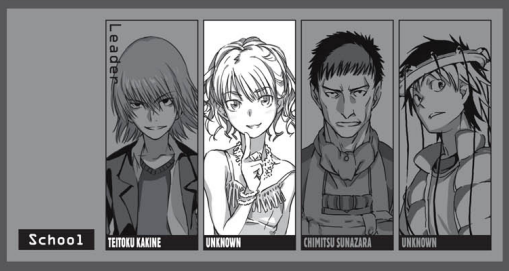
But it was still a key, and now that they had it, the four members of Group got to work once again.

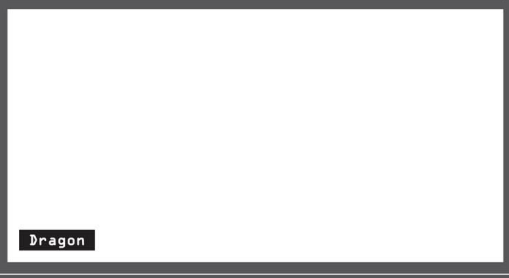
Transmission data from "UNDER_LINE"













Transmission data from "UNDER_LINE"

AFTERWORD

To those of you purchasing these books one at a time, it's good to see you again.

To those of you who bought all of them at once, pleased to meet you.

I'm Kazuma Kamachi.

I went all out on the science for Volume 15. The seven Level Fives, agricultural buildings, nanodevices, unmanned attack helicopters, satellites, computer viruses, Skill-Out…I brought out all the little science key words that have popped up in the past and delivered them in bulk.

The themes of this volume were the Academy City underworld and forlorn stories. Accelerator's viciousness as he sprints down the path of evil was another major point. Though it was evil, it wasn't the kind that left a bad-aftertaste—I was aiming for an ending where the reader would feel refreshed after getting through the whole thing. Did I succeed?

I think this was the most new characters appearing in a single book in the series (leaving aside groups like the Sisters). But his circle will never grow—perhaps one of the differences between Touma Kamijou and Accelerator.

Thank you to my illustrator, Mr. Haimura, and my editor, Mr. Miki. It ended up being a chaotic story, so I really appreciate you two sticking with me all the way through.

And thank you to all my readers. It felt like we were

dashing down a side road again, but seriously, thank you for making it through all these pages.

Now then, as I close the pages on this book,
and as I pray you'll make it through even more pages in the future,
today, at this hour, I lay down my pen.

…That white one—people might start calling him Robin Hood soon.

Kazuma Kamachi

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